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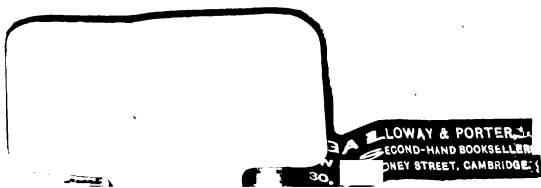
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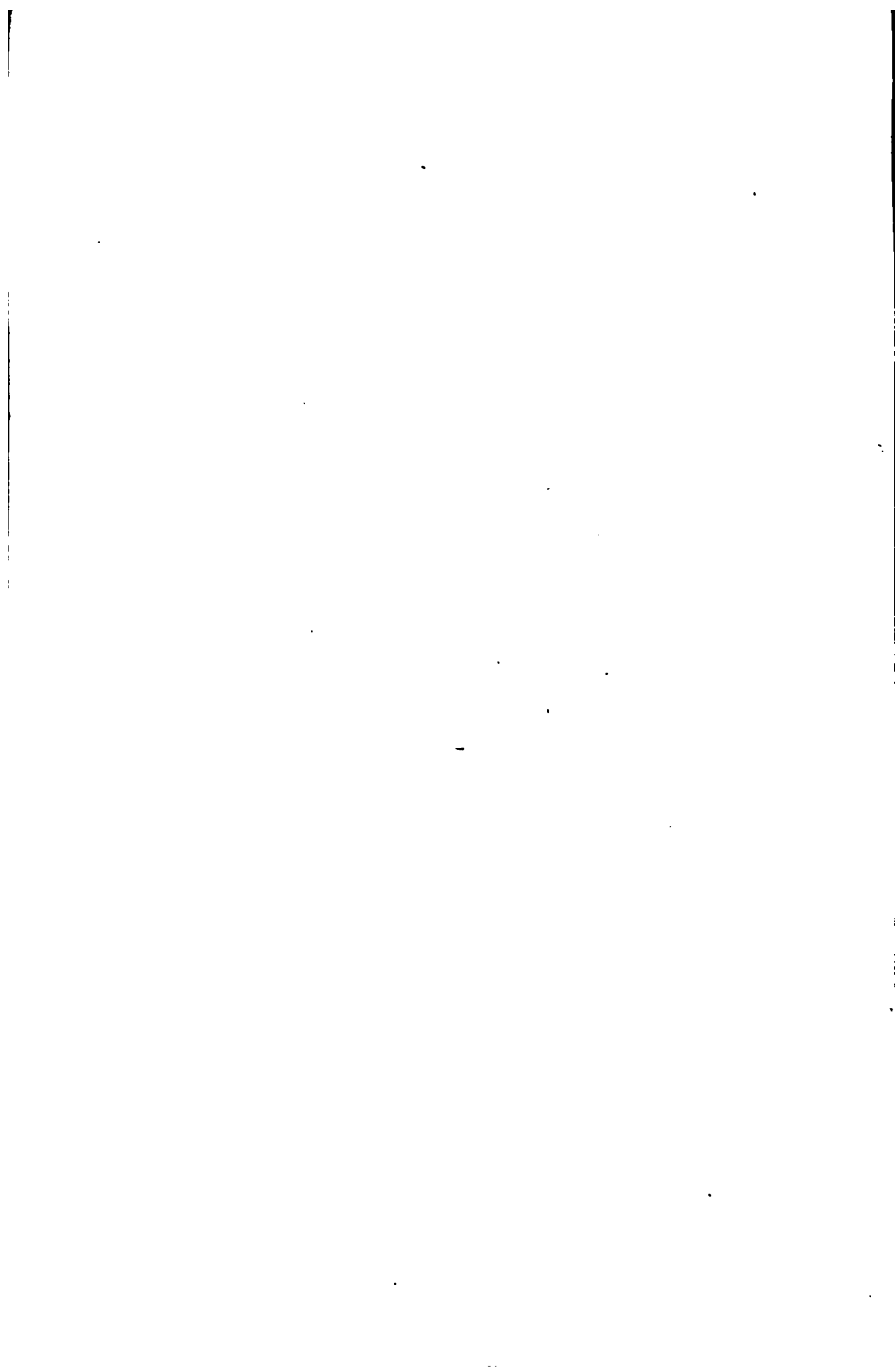
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Iquaticus Kuaster
from the author

Ralph Straus. Cambridge Feb. 12. '07.

THE MAN APART



THE MAN APART

BY

RALPH STRAUS



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1906

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TO MY GOOD FRIEND

NOËL BARWELL

TO WHOM IN A GREAT MEASURE THE STORY

OWES ITS EXISTENCE IN THE

PRESENT FORM

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THE MAN APART

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH LORD SOTHERNMERE IS SEEN WITH A COMPANION

THE Ostend packet was preparing for sea. Steam hissed from her pipes, pale fumes rose from her funnels, the noisy rattle of the cranes by her side accompanied the steady swing of luggage into her forward holds. Passengers poured on to the upper decks, and scrambled aft for sheltered seats; wharf-hands, shouldering all sorts of baggage, ran from the dockside trains to the steamer, jostling one another for their turn over the gangways in pursuit of their various clients. The scene, indeed, looked so full of an individual and peculiar animation that it was hard to conceive of its repetition 'thrice daily throughout the year.'

On such a fine July afternoon one saw every sort of English tourist. Here, forward, were the pale Londonized faces of office clerks with their wives, others of a party going a short, cheap, and perhaps not uncomfortable tour. Here, too, were puffy-faced commercial travellers grinning at everybody, happy in their cigars, and in the interchange of reminiscences. Here and there strong-limbed travellers bound for the

snowy Alps were to be seen. Those who were going to climb looked round them almost involuntarily for signs of an ice-axe amongst the baggage. The light patter of Frenchmen as they tripped to and fro seemed to float in and out of harsher Teutonic exclamations. The pile of chairs that had been stacked against a corner had gradually disappeared. Ladies who feared the worst had clothed themselves in garments that suggested December rather than July, and sat huddled in their chairs.

A young man, whose well-knit English figure and fine Saxon face had commanded more than one look of curiosity and admiration, was standing just forward of the bridge. He wore a light overcoat, into the pockets of which his hands were thrust. He was surveying, unmolested, the behaviour of his fellow-passengers. More than one British matron who had with her encumbrances other than bags and dressing-cases saw in him all the agreeable, if purely outward, qualities of the soldier, but Cedric Readham served his country in no official capacity. An earlier training in the fields of sport had given him that erect bearing. At present he was enjoying the bustle of the men and women around him, and there was an alertness in the glance of his light blue eyes which seemed to betoken an inward joy in the busy sounds on the pier. A close observer, however, might have noticed a look of restlessness, which from time to time caused a frown to appear at his forehead. It was as though he was feeling ashamed to give himself up, childlike, to the full enjoyment of the short voyage. Once he moved to the stern, and rested his arms on the rail, casting a glance along the moving panorama, but almost immediately he went back to his old position. Inclina-

tion and custom—in his twenty-five years he had made the crossing a score of times—both urged him to walk the length and breadth of the ship, and take a good look at the people aboard her ; to watch the gold-laced skipper in the execution of his duty as the ship cast off, and then, as she bore away, to get well forward in time to feel the first rise and dip as she cleared the bar ; finally, to pay due homage to her great engines moving their ponderous limbs with dull murmurs in the well-ordered routine of strenuous toil. As it was, Cedric felt that it was more becoming the thinker, the writer, to stand amidships after the manner of Napoleon Bonaparte on board H.M.S. *Bellerophon*, but, unlike that monarch, to meditate upon the beauty and national significance of the English coastline as its contours gradually fell astern.

So when bell-sounds from the bridge and shouts from the shore had warned him that the voyage had started, Cedric, from a well-chosen position between the two funnels, prepared to indulge himself in the wildest and most poetic reflections anent the cliffs of England. ‘To think,’ said he to himself, as a hiss of sea-foam along the ship’s side coincided with a slow gliding past the railed-in spectators on the Admiralty Pier—‘to think of the many who have stood as I now stand, gazing at this grand edge of England, looking so proudly out to France !’ He was rather pleased with this train of thought. It gave a sentimental interest to the many handkerchief wavings from the pier, from which the quickening beat of the ship’s paddles sounded sharp and clear, as if the pier itself were in motion. Several passengers stood up and calmly surveyed through binocular glasses the line of faces ; they were evidently little affected by the sentiments

which Cedric found so appropriate. The latter satisfied himself by giving a disdainful glance in their direction, and in so doing his eyes caught the figure of a girl apparently possessed by nobler feelings. Her back was towards him, but a half-step to his right was enough to show him part of the outline of what looked like an attractive face. One brown, bangled hand gripped the rail, the other pressed a handkerchief against a trembling mouth. Her gaze, as Cedric could see, was not on the shore, but was directed, as it seemed, almost unconsciously upon the passing wash of the sea to starboard of the now fast-going vessel. Cedric allowed himself to stand as if fascinated by the sight of the tears falling across her cheeks over the fingers of her clenched hand.

The steamer now settled down to that regular roll which many a seasick passenger aboard her shuddered to remember would last for rather over three and a half hours. A burst of spray came suddenly across the deck, scattering a party of elderly ladies in deck-chairs, who had looked forward to an afternoon of painful knitting fortified by the consumption of dry biscuits at stated intervals. They were unexpectedly made the recipients of a good round quantity of seawater. In the small panic which ensued Cedric crossed to the starboard rail, and met the eyes of the girl before him. She turned round in time to see in his glance that which we all know and recognise when a stranger is not only looking at us but thinking of us.

Cedric, recalled to himself, turned abruptly away. Somehow it seemed to him that he must have appeared inquisitive, if not downright rude. He had undoubtedly done more than merely glance at her, and no matter what his thoughts might have been at the

moment, he felt that there had been no warrant for such an earnest and prolonged stare. All the world seemed to be looking at him reproachfully as he walked forward, hot about the cheeks. He had long passed the 'awkward age,' yet it seemed as though the sight of this girl had taken him back a number of years. He remained forward for some time, his eyes fixed on the sea in front of him, but his thoughts were given to the girl. Something prompted him to say to himself: 'She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.' Then he laughed gently. The wind blowing in his face seemed to be giving him some answer, and it occurred to him that to look at a pretty girl was after all one of the most natural events in the world.

But the ordinary incidents of the sea-passage paled in interest—even though they included further misadventures to the biscuit-eating dames—beside his speculations about the girl. Had she noticed him, he wondered, sufficiently to take cognizance of his rude stare? He worried himself about her identity. She appeared to be alone. He came to the conclusion that this was her first cross-channel voyage, though for what precise reason he could not have said. Once or twice he allowed himself to obtain a view of her whole face, and each time his interest and admiration grew. He noticed now that she wore bracelets round both wrists, and a number of rings. They seemed out of place with her dress, and yet in harmony with her face. Her dark hair, large eyes, and full red lips suggested to Cedric's mind something of the gipsy, and he found himself wondering whether the gipsies he had seen wore thick bracelets. At fancy-dress balls they invariably did, but whether the gipsy-girl of Covent Garden bore any resemblance to the reality

Cedric could not say. She had not yet lost all traces of the tears that had been shed as the boat moved out of the harbour, and his pity was aroused. He hoped that she might be staying in Ostend, where he himself proposed to rest a few days before proceeding on a ramble through Belgium.

Several others besides himself had noticed the girl, but no one had spoken to her. A deck-chair contained a little bag that was her property, but she did not once sit down, preferring to stand by the rail and gaze out over the vast expanse of sea.

And when the long sands of Flanders showed a yellow line over the distant surf, it was of the girl who had wept that Cedric was thinking. As he walked aft to gather his hand-luggage it struck him that in another five minutes she would have in all probability gone out of his life as suddenly as she had come into it. He smiled a little bitterly. Cedric played cynic to himself occasionally; he had even come so far as to believe that his was essentially a cynical nature.

Amid the bustle of disembarkation Cedric had some difficulty in following the girl's movements, but he saw her cross the gangway and shake hands with a man on the station platform. Cedric himself was busied with his own luggage—he was to stay at the *Hôtel Continental*—and in the few moments when he was explaining matters to a porter he lost sight of the girl and her companion. But she had been met by a man, middle-aged, Cedric thought, from the fleeting glance he had obtained, but a man. He felt absurdly annoyed. Even the antics of the elderly ladies who had been the victims of repeated onslaughts from the sea failed to amuse him. The porter was speaking to him in high-pitched, rapid tones.

‘What is it?’ asked Cedric irritably. ‘I told you there was one large box, and that’s all. Tell the *Continental* man.’

Ten minutes later he was being driven through the town. He was once more in his beloved Belgium, but without that sense of pleasure that had always been his on all former occasions of the kind. True, the circumstances were very different now; his mother had died since he had last crossed the waters, but he had seldom if ever been worse tempered than he now felt himself to be, and his frame of mind became no more ameliorated when he considered any causes there might be for his feelings of annoyance. He had seen the girl drive off with the man, so she was evidently staying in Ostend for the present. He felt that he wanted to know more, and as his omnibus rattled along the sea-front he remembered that the man had a somewhat bristly black moustache—not a very surprising fact, but one which, if anything, increased his ill-humour.

Then, when he reached the hotel, he recollected that he had come to Belgium to work, to be impersonal, nothing more than an observing-machine to be set in motion for the novel which at present existed only in his brain, and even there with no very great degree of clearness.

He unpacked a few necessities and went down into one of the public rooms. He picked up one or two papers and read them aimlessly. There seemed to be no one in the hotel whom he knew, and of this Cedric felt glad. He was hardly a sociable man. He dined early, and sauntered out on to the promenade.

The whole place seemed ablaze with light. A line of hotels faced the black seas. Cedric glanced up at

the people dining. A crowd had collected outside one of the rooms, and was listening to a woman's voice. Her notes were being wafted out through the open windows. He made his way along, now gazing on to the far-stretching sands, now looking about him at the people. A tall, bearded man, wearing a bright red hat, was selling some English newspapers. He thrust a copy of the *Sporting Times* under Cedric's nose, and made some coarse joke in broken English. Another man bearing a sack on his shoulders besought him to buy a toy in the shape of a fluffy rabbit, which would jump and turn a somersault on pressure being applied to an indiarubber ball attached to it. Cedric smilingly shook his head and walked on. A couple of superbly-dressed women glanced at him as he passed, a smile of admiration—the smile that can never be bought—upon their faces. The English as a whole, they thought, were a handsome nation.

Cedric felt that one of his old fits of dreariness was stealing over him, a sense almost of apathy, a conviction that nothing mattered very much. He wheeled round suddenly, and walked back towards the brilliantly-illuminated Casino. A foreign monarch was expected to be present at the evening performance, and crowds lined a path from the street behind. Cedric sat down at a little table in a café that stood at the head of the promenade, and ordered coffee. The man with the toy rabbits started his usual formula, and then, recognising that he had already solicited the Englishman a few moments before, moved on to another table, where three young men were laughing over their beer. One of them bought a rabbit, and joked with the waiter in curious French about it.

‘Readham, by all the Gods!’

Cedric turned round, to see an acquaintance of his, a London journalist, by name Hetherington.

'Hullo !' he said a little ungraciously. They shook hands. Hetherington was a large, black-bearded man, who was never to be seen without a pipe between his lips.

'Cheerful sort of place, this, isn't it ?' said he. 'Well, and how are you ?'

'Oh, as fit as usual,' replied Cedric, 'and watching rabbits being sold.'

'I bought two for the kiddies,' said Hetherington, laughing. 'I'm off home to-morrow.'

'I've only just come.' It was impossible not to like this great, large-hearted man, but Cedric did not disguise from himself the desire for solitude.

'And I suppose you'll roam about the place till you get sick of it, and then go home,' continued Hetherington. 'That's the worst of you moneyed fellows—you always do what you like.'

Cedric did not reply. His glass of coffee was brought, and he helped himself to sugar.

'I prefer cups,' said Hetherington ; 'they are more home-like.' He inhaled an immense quantity of smoke from his pipe, and puffed it out slowly and ostentatiously, as though, indeed, he wanted to show the people round him that an honest briar was vastly superior to their twopenny-halfpenny cigars and their papery things which went by the name of cigarettes.

'Well, you will have them to-morrow,' replied Cedric.

'You may be quite certain of that, unless I'm shipwrecked. And you, Readham, are you here for long ?'

'I shall travel about the country a bit. I'm off to Bruges in a day or two, and from there I shall work my way northwards.'

An orchestra composed of half a dozen young ladies attired in costumes of pale blue and of one unfortunate man in evening dress, whose duties concerned more than one musical instrument, started to play a selection from a popular Parisian operetta. The two men drank up their coffee and strolled past the hotels.

'I'd rather dine in private,' exclaimed Hetherington, 'than have the whole of Ostend see each mouthful I take disappear down my mouth.'

'I agree with you,' said Cedric, glancing up at the dining-tables. He gave a sudden start. At one of the tables next to a window sat the girl whom he had seen on board the steamer. But what a change! There she had been a weeping girl, alone and miserable; now, in evening dress, she appeared radiantly happy, and—to Cedric—more beautiful than ever; more, too, of the woman was in her general carriage. The man with the black moustache was sitting opposite her. They were both evidently in the best of spirits.

Cedric clutched the journalist's arm. 'See that man there?' he whispered, inclining his head in the direction of the table. 'He looks English. D'you know by any chance who he is? I mean the man with the girl in pink.'

Hetherington looked up and laughed.

'Know him?' he said. 'Oh, I know him well enough by sight. That is Lord Sothernmere.'

'And the girl?'

'Now, my dear fellow, you are really asking me too much. As if I could possibly know every girl I see with Sothernmere. You don't ask anything, do you?'

'I don't know this man, Lord Sothernmere. I don't remember to have ever heard the name before. Who is he?'

'A curious, god-forsaken sort of devil,' was Hetherington's definition. 'Not quite steady enough for my liking. He is one of those men who don't care what anyone says of them. He chooses his own society, and if there are some people who don't want to know him, there are plenty who do.' He looked into Cedric's face. 'Fine woman,' he said. He was about to continue, when Cedric pulled him away. They walked towards the Casino. }

'Tell me,' said Cedric suddenly, after a pause, 'isn't Lord Sothernmere the man who went on the stage or did something of the sort? I seem, now I come to think of it, to remember something about him.'

'Yes, that's the man. In with a queer lot—decent fellows, some of them, but——' He shook his head.

'Married?' asked Cedric.

'Good Lord, no!'

'Ah!' said Cedric.

He thought Hetherington rather dull.

CHAPTER II

CHIPTON HALL

ABOUT a mile or so from the main road, running southwards from the manufacturing town of Archester, lies the little village of Chipton, a struggling group of red-brick houses, which, possessing neither historic interest nor architectural beauty, is typical of many of the Midland hamlets of our day. Chipton is only a few miles from Archester, with which it is directly connected by a winding and dipping road skirting the edge of the Ganton Hills. Generally, however, this way is a deserted one, for most of the traffic between the two places proceeds along the main road as far as the Hope Inn. From this point Chipton is reached by turning westward along a short lane. The extra distance is preferred on account of the easy gradients, although some of the natives persistently use the shorter route, which, leading from the top of Archester High Street some way up Ganton Hill, has something of the switchback in its ups and downs. Yet pedestrians invariably prefer its discomfort to the monotony of the main road. It commands a superb view of the neighbouring valleys, and from its rise towards Chipton the village church and the trees of Chipton Hall are clearly recognisable some way below.

The Hall is what tourists call picturesque. Parts of it are Early Tudor, but in the lines of its broad garden front, with its high and symmetrically-placed bay windows, each marked along the roof-ridge by its appropriate gable, one perceives the ideal of a later architectural culture—the plan proper to the dwelling of a Francis Bacon, some of whose garden-pictures are indeed to be realized from its southern windows ; a house it is, stately only when seen from close quarters, but beautiful from any point. Coming over the hill road from Archester, the smoke of its chimneys seems to come from the very centre of a copse in a wide green hollow a little to the left of Chipton village. Another quarter of a mile, and its little bell-tower stands out over the torn limbs of its guardian beeches. Yet a few paces more, and at a certain field-gate upon any warm day cyclists and others can be seen to dismount in order to get a general view of the house and its pleasaunce. It seemed, as it were, too good for the place, too fine for its lands—just a cup of green-gold pasture, poorly wooded except for those old beech-trees north of the walled garden, and for the struggling elms ranged along the short, straight drive from the east. It was always damp, and for the last half-century had been but indifferently sheltered from the keener winds. Every drop of rain borne by an implacable sou'-wester seemed to reach its walls unrestrained by so much as one kindly cedar. Yet it was home to its owner, and, after the death of his mother, almost home to Cedric Readham.

Here old Lady Cardellan was living out her quiet, patient life. It was her dower house, and, lonely as it was, she loved it. Fond of her flowers, of her few pets, and of the poor at her gates, she passed her time

soberly and apart from either the business or the gaiety of the country around her.

It was to this quiet place that Cedric, conscious of his aunt's love, came when he returned from his tour through Belgium. It had not been a success. Something had been wrong; ideas had ceased to shape themselves. He had curtailed his stay to a week or two, spent in feverishly moving from place to place. After seeing Hetherington embark for Dover on the day after his own arrival in Ostend, he had wandered aimlessly about, avoiding the few people whom he had recognised, enjoying nothing. Thoughts had come to mind unwanted about the girl he had seen dining with Lord Sothernmere. Things generally turned out like that, and his sense of humour was tickled as he remembered how awkward he had felt on realizing that he had stared at her on the boat. It was the same old story, he supposed, and yet there seemed to be something almost inexplicable about the girl's tears. If she loved this man, why had she been crying on the seas? Was she in love with the man? Had he been witnessing merely one or two incidents in a possibly vulgar intrigue? What was it?

'I'm getting sentimental,' said he; 'besides, it's nothing to me.'

He went to Bruges, but Bruges, with all its beauties, failed to attract him. It seemed dull and uninteresting. In less than a fortnight he had written to Lady Cardellan asking if she would house her nephew.

'I shall be working most of the time,' he wrote, 'and I don't expect you will find me much of a nuisance.' And when the dear old lady had written to say that she hoped he would consider Chipton Hall his home, Cedric crossed from Antwerp, where he had

been staying for a few days, to Harwich, and a day later appeared in Chipton.

'I'm glad you have come, Cedie,' she said simply, and that was all. Until Cedric's arrival she had rarely been seen further afield than the post-town—a matter of four miles. Now the pair were often seen walking or driving together. That was the only difference.

Theirs was a placid stock, a family of what neighbours called 'equable dispositions'—reserved, kindly, unostentatious, serene, yet in a measure melancholy.

In Cedric there was blood that might have militated against this, for Constance Wilmot was, to use his father's pet phrase, 'sea-born.' It meant that they were all very happy when he said this, something of the lover's look in his grey eyes, something of the boy's tone in the voice of the man of years, a homage to healthy, breezy nature, a tribute of romantic respect to a sailor father and a sea-faring girl.

'This is what comes of aimless travelling and too much novel-reading,' old Lord Loughton had said on receiving the news of his boy's South Sea marriage. But, as Cedric's mother had often told him with her gay laugh, the Readhams never bothered themselves much about younger sons. So there was no feud, no cutting away from the parental stock—grandpapa, as Cedric well remembered, always kissing his daughter-in-law with a sort of sad amusement, and with the air of making a first experiment on each occasion. 'Don't be afraid of me, sir,' she had laughed the day of their home-coming; 'he called me Grace Darling,' she used to add, telling the story.

But grandpapa himself was only a dim recollection to Cedric—his mother, especially in her last illness, a painfully vivid memory. She had been so brave in her

earlier widowhood, equally brave in the moment of her own death. Cedric thought he had been brave too, but he was glad now to drink deep of the contemplative charm of Chipton, to give himself up a little to melancholy, to regrets, for all that, happy in the unquestioning ways of 'Kind Aunt Evelyn.' Its owner enjoyed this title in contradistinction to a relative known in the family as 'Poor Janet,' George's wife, who was in Cedric's schoolboy judgment 'a beast.' In the actual, however, the poor thing possessed a warm heart, a frigid exterior, a passion for business, and a love of ceremonial. The world called her a snob. Her husband refrained from describing her epigrammatically, but he looked acquiescence in the Readham dictum that she was 'impossible.' Foreign Courts took much the same view, and consequently Uncle Loughton was never more than second secretary anywhere, but he took his luck with the steady, sad smile of a Readham in distress, and lived as peaceably as might be, diplomat or no diplomat, to the day of his death.

'You know, Cedie,' said Lady Cardellan one day, 'I cannot think of you as grown up. I always think of you as a little boy who used to break things and get into scrapes and frighten the whole house by pretending to fall downstairs. Your dear mother used to say she thought you would always be a bit wild, and I said I thought sending you to Cambridge would be a great responsibility. But your grandfather had set his mind on it.'

Certainly it seemed as if the mischief had gone out of him. To his friends as well as himself he had changed rapidly and unexpectedly. His 'Kind Aunt Evelyn,' as he still called her, could remember him as the irrepressible little boy at Sieveley, curly-headed,

lithe-limbed, going to be so handsome—in his mother's words ; then, fresh from school, an irresponsible athlete with a host of friends, expected to play at Lord's for the University, with a long life before him of big-game shooting and foreign travel, such as his father had loved ; lastly, an almost morose personality, seemingly too old for his years, quietly yet doggedly opinionated, but still companionable.

Ever since her husband's death Lady Cardellan had retired somewhat into herself. Even in her married life, which had perforce been a busy one, she had proved herself one of those people, enviable as relatives, who never inquire after family affairs, but are content to receive such news of its individuals as may be directly reported to them. Thus, it had been sufficient for her to notice these apparent changes in her nephew's disposition without seeking for an intellectual explanation. For the moment his present demeanour was to her mind amply accounted for by the circumstance of his mother's death. She was well aware that he had latterly shown a predilection for a career of letters, and his solitary walks and absent-minded ways struck her as an indication that he was probably finding solace in the construction of another work of fiction.

Under these circumstances the dear little woman felt it almost kind of him to be with her as much as he was, to help her with her cottage-visiting, to accompany her on the Sunday pilgrimage to the home-farm. Every Sunday, wet or fine, they made their way across the pastures in that direction to see and hear all about the fat stock, to arrange for certain little gifts of charity in the neighbourhood, and finally for Cedric to enjoy a short game with the bailiff's children, whilst his aunt sat and chatted with Mrs. Puddock.

Cedric could not bear Mrs. Puddock. No one ever knew what Mrs. Puddock had to do with the home-farm at all, although that good wife herself believed that not only the home-farm but all Chipton would come to an end were she to die before its owner. Mrs. Puddock's history was a simple one—she had been a trusted servant to the Cardellans since her childhood—and it explained her sojourn in Chipton, whilst leaving the location of her person at the home-farm a matter for eternal astonishment to every tenant of the estate.

'Sarah Steers I was afore I took up with Puddock,' was a frequent prelude to the narrative of this worthy woman's life, and 'Many's the time I've wished that name back again' was a parenthesis thrown in only on occasions when Mr. Puddock had failed in some important particular to attain to that high standard of vigorous toil which his wife hourly required of him.

Mr. Puddock was what is generally called a labouring man, but the tragedy of his existence lay in the fact that, whereas his mistress never required him to do anything in particular, his amiable spouse expected and exacted from him a very great deal.

Yet, after all, Mrs. Puddock was, had they all known it, a very real boon to the community of Chipton. The kind old Dowager realized much of her sound sense, and liked her for herself as a link with the past, with her happy married days. Every Sunday the old lady was to be found in Mrs. Puddock's parlour, papers and letters on the table before them, and a world of business in process of transaction. The Dowager's charity was immensely assisted and strengthened as to its utility by this means, for Sarah Puddock was able to impart to her mistress many things, good or

bad, of the cottage folk, which by no other means could ever have reached the ears of the lady of Chipton Hall. Sarah was a great gossip, but undeniably honest and straightforward, and although everyone spoke ill of her tongue, they admitted the soundness of her heart. It was typical of Cedric to consider that the excellence of the one could not make up for the bitterness of the other.

Mrs. Puddock had always been the first to pass criticism upon this young man's demeanour on every one of his visits to Chipton. It was, moreover, generally held all over the estate that since Mrs. Readham's death Mr. Cedric 'was not hisself.' 'Ah, and it's a great pity 'e ain't,' said Mrs. Puddock; 'the people 'll be sayin' as 'ow 'e's got somethin' on 'is mind if 'e goes on a rampagin' like this!'

Lady Cardellan introduced an extenuating circumstance. 'Well, you know, Sarah,' she had said, 'Mr. Cedric takes after his grandfather. He's fond of thinking.'

'Yes, I dare say, my lady, but I don't 'old with this thinkin', nor never could. Thinkin',' continued she, rising and setting the parlour door ajar so as to be well within hearing distance of Mr. Puddock, whose desultory methods of performing his Sunday duties had already that morning called for signal rebuke—'thinkin'!—I know what thinkin' is. I says to my 'usband, I says, of a Monday morning, I says, "Puddock, get up." "Wait a moment," says 'e; "I'm thinkin'." Oh, I know what thinkin' is, my lady. Mr. Cedric 'e never used to think at all one time.'

'Well, well,' said Lady Cardellan with just a little amusement in her voice, 'what are we to do with him,

Sarah? I'm afraid he is very much pulled down. He is certainly very much changed; the Readhams, you know, sometimes like feeling miserable. I don't suppose it will last. But it is difficult, as I tell him, to think of him as other than a rather tiresome little boy.'

'I don't 'old with this bein' miserable, nor never could,' said Mrs. Puddock. A twinkle came into her little beady eyes, and the lines on her queer puckered face altered their shape. 'E oughter marry,' she continued.

The Dowager smiled as she tried to picture to herself the girl whom Cedric would choose. She was obliged to own that, from the way her nephew was going, marriage appeared the most unlikely of all possibilities.

'Drat the boy!' rejoined Mrs. Puddock crossly, and then she too smiled. Mr. Cedric was no friend of hers, but he was no enemy. She turned away to shout to Puddock. She usually did that when at a loss for words. The weary Puddock looked in through the door inquiringly. Cedric always spoke of him as 'the sheep,' and just then he fitted the name admirably. But Lady Cardellan did not notice him. Her thoughts were of 'her Cedie,' and she was very worried about him. He was vaguely disappointing.

Much as Cedric had changed in the three years of University life which had been his, the death of his mother had, indeed, wrought a greater alteration. A recluse by choice, he seemed now fairly on the road to misanthropy. Yet there were moments when he deliberately tried to shake off the habit of a real and vital melancholy which was stealing almost uncannily upon him. At such times he would work harder than

even the curate in parish-visiting, and he played in almost every country game according to the year's garb. Everyone liked him, but with the boys of the place his air of subdued sadness militated against the effect of real sportsmanship, and he felt he was not a success either with them or himself. In the very fact that there was still so much of the egoist in him lay the chief reason for his failure, such as it was. His aunt's worldly wisdom, mostly reflected from the minds of people and a life long shunned, came strangely on his ears. 'A London season, you know, Cedric,' said she—'you want to go about for a while. Dear me, what would your grandfather have said to you?' It was characteristic, this quoting of their own kind at every step of life's journey.

But Cedric would shake his head, and say that he was well content to spend the coming autumn at Chipton if his aunt would have him.

So the summer months slipped stealthily by, leaving him as aimless as ever. By the fall of the year his attempts to interest himself in the people around him had well-nigh broken down before a definite feeling of unhappiness and mental disquiet. He tried repeatedly to weld his thoughts into some cohesive whole, to utilize them for another work of fiction. Chipton, he thought irritably, was the worst place he had ever known. Lady Cardellan's pets were everywhere; they mewed, they barked, they chirped from one end of the house to the other; yet he would not move. He retreated to the library. Chipton had always been to him a playground. This was indeed his first long visit since he had come to man's estate. Until now he had shunned the library as being a stuffy, dismal place, a room in which no man could hope to think

clearly and freely. But then he supposed he had meant to take a complete rest, and it was only when he felt driven at last to his writing that the impossibility of working elsewhere in the house forced itself upon him.

In this determination he found no little solace, but its utility was immediately dispelled by one incident. On the day when he first essayed to make the library his work-room, the little gallery cunningly panelled with its Jacobean bookcases, rich in fine carving and tawny-coloured books, was looking its best. It was one of those warm, gentle-spirited days in October, which, in spite of their individual charm, serve perhaps rather as sad reminders of the summer than as indications of a mellow, fruitful autumn. The sun shone steadily into the room through small panes of coloured glass, projecting on to the floor the cheerful blazonings of an antique heraldry. Cedric sat himself down at the table in the oriel. The peace of his surroundings was almost a distraction to him. Through the lower frames of clear glass the old-world garden stretched before him in alluring perspective; each pond shone like an opal; the stone curbs and edgings, gold and green with autumn's incrustations, were here and there splashed with the broad shadows of the trimmed yews. The long rosy wall glowed genially in luxuriant sunlight; beside it, its trim path seemed almost made for peaceful meditation. Lovely in its solitariness, this garden, where to-day hardly a bird moved and not a leaf stirred in the clear, still air, preached that serenity of which, perhaps, only unconscious life is capable.

Within the room Cedric's gaze left him with a sense of even greater oppression. He was surrounded with

the fruit of men's minds, now long since dead. It was impossible for one who pretended to be a thinker to seek refuge from the self-contempt which these reflections engendered by viewing the world's strife for knowledge as the outcome of idiot aims, of which the Tower of Babel was but a symbol. Then he became conscious of the value of curiosity. Such a library as this was primarily a record, not so much of what past generations had written, but of what they had read. Inquisitive for the nonce, and moved by a momentary return to interest in his family tradition, he rose from his seat and looked almost shyly at the shelves. The volumes near him evidently represented the books of a cultivated eighteenth-century household. A glance along the backs showed him Tillotson's 'Sermons,' 'The Whole Duty of Man,' 'The Lady's Calling,' 'The Government of the Tongue,' 'The Compleat Works of Mr. Pope,' the novels of Fielding and Smollett. Then his eye noted a whole row of classical editions—Elzevirs, Foulises, Baskervilles. He pulled one or two down from their places, and saw that many of them, especially the Latin poets, were annotated in a minute copperplate hand. The book-plate was of Howard George, third Baron Loughton, a wit, a letter-writer, a friend of John Locke.

His first thought was perhaps something of sombre pride in thus being brought into contact with a learned ancestor. The backward swirl of thought was inevitable. The impatient little sound, the momentary frown, the turning away from the shelf, expressed a realization of ignorance. Of this group of books not a title sounded strange to his ears, yet of the works which they revealed or screened hardly one was

known to him. Vaguely but certainly he felt how good it must be to marshal the supreme literary works of all ages, so that they take their place in that great vista of art, which to see, to comprehend, to appreciate, is perhaps to draw very near—if only in part—to some Beatific Vision. For several minutes Cedric walked backwards and forwards between the cases, looking from time to time at the peaceful prospect below, and then at the desk, where lay his jottings for another book. Somehow the atmosphere of the room was becoming a hindrance to him, assuredly not the assistance he had looked for.

Cedric could not help thinking how many authors had begun as early as he. Were they ashamed of their work in afteryears? Did they feel—as he felt now—a thirst to inquire into the minds of their predecessors? Had they appeased it? Had the knowledge so gained materially assisted them? Were their thoughts the finer, or only spoilt of their freshness, rendered more conventional, more obvious? Cedric was indubitably sincere when he was melancholy. He was oppressed now. He was lonely—lonely in the sense that there was no one to share his thoughts at the moment of enthusiasm, no other child to play the game, to whom to hold up the toy, from whom to catch the glance of delight. Why had he not read more of other men's books? Why had he not cared to watch them striving for, winning, missing the self-same ends towards which he now gazed somewhat helplessly, to see through the smoke-wreaths round a bygone fireside the face of a Johnson, a Sterne, a Swift, to hear their talk and read their thoughts?

It was getting dusk. From the window the garden,

with its trees and flowers, seemed to have changed, as if in sympathy with the process of his thoughts. The smile had gone from its face, and sunset had stolen on the land with the sullenness of winter. He made his way outside the house, and walked across a short strip of meadow to reach the point from which the vale could best be seen by the wayfarer. He paused and turned as he came to the spot. Surely we are more touched by country scenes in autumn than at any other time of the year. Man is Lord of the spring; its gaiety seems to be donned only in obedience to his joy. Autumn holds him in thrall. He watches as in the face of a mistress its smiling mornings, the patient sadness of its twilights. Cedric felt something of this now as he watched the angry glow fade on the face of the night. The Hall, breathing its column of smoke into the still air, looked beautiful indeed from the stile beyond the home-farm, and Cedric reflected how an old house becomes, as it were, part of Nature. Its walls, its roofs, how they take upon themselves the tender colours of the year as do the trees! The hand of Time softens the edges, takes the hard look from out of the mouldings, renders more subtle the lines of the pinnacles. Creepers of all sorts nestle about it the more readily, as to something near to their kind, and birds nest happily within the shelter of its chimneys as in the branches of its elms.

As it grew darker and colder, Cedric bent his steps towards home. To go indoors into the warmly-lighted Hall would again bring upon him that feeling of aimless lassitude, not unmingled with melancholy, which he associated with his life at Chipton. He was doing nothing, and there now seemed nothing for him to do. Within twelve hours the only object to which he

had of late looked forward seemed worse than impossible, for it seemed worthless. Without it, however, the future assumed the form of an endless succession of meaningless days. Alas ! that there should be no seasons in a man's life corresponding in Time to those of the year. 'Could one,' mused Cedric, 'but exist as do these growing things, and take joy in the yearly change of state—in its mere recurrences !'

He heard the cry of a farm-hand, and listened to the soft tread of the horses in the paddock. Common to brutes, then, and all other created things save man, there was at least one immeasurable virtue. He thought how at this very moment the world around was preparing itself for the cold, the desolation of winter.

A human being in distress, what is the remedy ? Complain of the situation of the moment—is there no relief ? Assuredly. Can one count the number of possible actions open to any one man at any one time ? And yet it would seem that any one of them must point a course of its own. To realize this is to some minds to be overwhelmed with the responsibility implied in the possession of free-will. And so the mind is wont to seek relief in the idea that free-will is in reality non-existent, that there is no action which, once perpetrated, can surprise creation. Thus, to enjoy a sense of freedom with a certainty of control is the position of the fatalist. Without it some would be driven to madness. Cedric felt this now, and with it came a greater cheerfulness of heart.

Lady Cardellan noticed a brighter look on her nephew's face than she had seen for some time past.

'What have you been doing all day, Cedie ?' she inquired.

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, what *are* you going to do, my dear boy?’

‘Anything, auntie’—this time with a laugh. ‘I’m prepared to do anything that turns up. Observe, I mean what I say. I admit I want an occupation. I want a life, an object, but I can see no one action for me to-day or to-morrow which is to take me into it. No, it must just turn up.’

‘Things don’t often do that, I’m afraid,’ said Lady Cardellan.

‘But did you really think I meant to sit here quietly by your side, awaiting the Premiership or a call to the French Republic? No, I only mean I’m not quite sure any longer what I ought to do—at least, I don’t think so—I mean the little things that make the beginnings of a career; and I propose not to shun things quite in the way I’ve been doing, not to refuse right and left, just as if I had a great purpose, which every question tended to disturb. No, I’ll be obedient. I’ll do anything I’m asked to, only I must be asked. Do you see?’

‘Well, that reminds me.’ Lady Cardellan rang the bell. ‘There’s something very prosaic for you to begin on. Where did you put that telegram I opened for Mr. Readham?’ she asked of the servant.

‘On your writing-table, I think, my lady.’

‘What’s it about?’ asked Cedric.

‘Oh, somebody wants you for a luncheon-party in London.’

Cedric took the paper from the tray. ‘Oh, it’s Tom Manning,’ cried he; ‘welcome the commonplace!’

CHAPTER III

WHICH MAY EXPLAIN MUCH THAT HAPPENED LATER

CEDRIC'S boyhood could have been summed up in one word—health. And his first year at Cambridge saw only a repetition of athletic triumphs. His early friendships, too, were just such as would be natural in a man whose idea of a University was little more than a centre for sport. This was the result of too frivolous a life at Rugby, whither he had gone readily enough in response to his mother's earnest wish.

Lady Cardellan had often told him afterwards that his grandfather, had he lived, would have felt the family tradition of Eton and Trinity outraged by this choice of school, but in consenting to his going to Cambridge Cedric's mother had already made a sentimental sacrifice. Coming as she did from a far country, her early notions of public school life centred round stories of Dr. Arnold at Rugby and of his college at Oxford.

Cedric's education, therefore, had been a matter of compromise between herself and her husband's relations. Mrs. Readham had taken pains to discover the whereabouts of old Lord Loughton's rooms in College. Uncle George wrote from Mentone that he could not remember; he himself had 'kept' in Jesus Lane during the one year of his residence before entering

the diplomatic service. So all sorts of family letters were searched, and the fact finally established with reasonable certainty that the rooms ultimately secured for Cedric in the Great Court had actually been occupied by his grandfather, then Stanley George Readham, Fellow-Commoner of the College.

In the Readham blood this family sentiment was strong, but Cedric's mother was of the opinion that it could be carried to excess. In sending her boy to Trinity, then, and settling him in these particular rooms, she had carried out what she felt would have been her husband's wishes. She was in her heart glad to see in him a certain carelessness in these matters, a putting them aside on the threshold of his University life for laughter, good company, sport, and games. She acted the press-censor in dealing with the letters of reminiscence and advice which came from her brother-in-law in Italy, and from the Dowager at Chipton. The latter recalled in a long and beautifully worded letter her first visit to Cambridge in order to be present at the installation of the Chancellor, the then Duke of Northumberland, beginning with gossip of the dresses, the people, reminiscences of the feastings and playgoings, of antique University ceremonial long since swept away. She had gone on to speak of her brother's residence, and of her own father's advice to him. The Cambridge of his day had been very jealous of class distinctions, and she recalled a hundred little maxims which she thought he would have been glad Cedric should hear and remember.

The style of the Mentone letter was more curt in form, less imaginative in feeling, but it contained direct counsel as to whom he should know. It gave indeed, quite a long list of contemporary names

associated in the past with their family in peace or war. It was not a very good letter ; it showed little recognition of social change and the flight of time, but exhibited in its four or five pages a sense of duty, a faithfulness to a family creed.

Cedric had often since then reflected on the fatality which in the guise of motherly love withheld these letters from him.

So for two terms Cedric's rooms re-echoed to the shouts of the good-humoured schoolboys who formed his set. He did no two hours of work, and by the June following his entrance to the University had amassed a large acquaintance within and without his college, based entirely upon his reputation for games. His letters home were few and far between. They were particularly bald in detail when they did come, and his mother remarked that his handwriting showed no signs of improvement. His uncle George promised to visit him in the summer, but never came. His mother, however, came twice, the last time as one of a party for May-week. Cedric, some days before this festivity, had written a long and carefully-worded epistle. His mother read passages of it to Lady Loughton, who was staying in London. 'Evidently dictated,' was that lady's comment. Mrs. Readham did not think fit to repeat Aunt Janet's remark, but she went down to Cambridge a day earlier than she otherwise would have done.

It was not quite clear to her why Cedric, who had definitely promised to climb with his uncle in the Southern Alps during July, should have suddenly expressed the strongest desire to remain in Cambridge during that month, especially as she felt sure, in spite of his remark to the contrary, that most people would

be away. She was by no means impressed with his fine flavoured phrases about reading, making up for lost time. It was of course the idea of the family in general that he would take a degree, as every Readham, who had resided a sufficient number of terms, had creditably done since the days of Elizabeth, but she knew also that Cedric perfectly understood that for her part she cared not two straws whether he did or did not leave the University dignified with the title of Bachelor in Arts. She had, indeed, told him that so long as he made nice friends and grew up a healthy, clean-lived man, she would be satisfied.

She took him to task the first afternoon.

‘We’ll go on the river, Cedie,’ said she—‘and a ribbon, please, that won’t clash with my sunshade. Bring a book in case you get angry with me. I’m going to talk to you very seriously.’

Cedric laughed as they strolled over the lawns. He was very fond and very proud of his pretty little mother. A maternal lecture under the willows of Clare was not so much to be dreaded.

‘Now,’ said Mrs. Readham, leaning back on her cushions, as they drifted under the college bridge, and made for the sunlit stretch of water towards King’s, ‘what are you going to say to your uncle George, and who, please, is the young lady who will have the best of your society during July? Is she as nice as your little mother?’

Mrs. Readham delivered these inquiries with the same sort of smile which had captivated her husband years ago. She was a shrewd citizen of the world, and was in her own estimation something of a diplomatist. She would have been prepared to bet several pairs of gloves that the sequel to her overture would begin

with blushes, and proceed by way of confession to a manly if impetuous appeal. Nothing of the sort. Her observations were greeted with a short and hearty laugh, the laugh of one seeing a self-confident person missing an easy shot. Mrs. Readham was thrown completely off her guard. The smile vanished from her face. She flicked an imaginary something from her frock, and put a hand irritably to her hat.

‘Then, what’s all this nonsense about the vacation?’ she demanded, closing her parasol as they glided into the shade of a sycamore.

Cedric intimated that there was no nonsense about it at all. He continued, warming to his subject, that there was a deeper significance in University life than the ordinary man realized, that everyone except the absolute ‘rotters’ came up for the Long, that his friends D’Arcy Vaughan and Lemonier—‘two of the most brilliant men up at the ‘Varsity’—were coming up, and that they all wanted to be together. Seeing his mother’s blank look of astonishment, he made haste to add that he had been asked to play in several local matches during July.

‘And that,’ said he, ‘is better than climbing, anyway.’

Mrs. Readham contented herself for the moment with expressing the prettiest interest in her dear boy’s new friends. His father, she said, would have liked him to make friends with nice clever people. She would like to meet ‘just lots’ of them herself whilst she was in Cambridge.

Cedric’s ‘Of course, mater,’ was qualified by a hint that neither D’Arcy Vaughan nor Lemonier were quite her ‘sort.’

‘You might not get on with them at first,’ he added.

'Several men I know didn't like them at first. I didn't myself, but when you come to know them better you begin to appreciate them. You see, you are here for such a short time, and they are, I know, very busy during May-week. It isn't as if they were Trinity men; and then, their own people are coming up.'

It had come upon him quite suddenly that he did not wish his mother to meet these new friends. In their presence, under their influence, such a meeting had seemed most natural as well as most desirable; now it appeared anything but advisable. For the first time in his life he felt awkward with his mother, and inclined to be annoyed.

'Oh, you must let me meet them,' said Mrs. Readham, and inasmuch as the two gentlemen in question were in reality as anxious to meet her as she was to meet them, it ended in their joining a river party, and before they returned to their college that evening they had each been separately engaged by Cedric's far-seeing mother in a *tête-à-tête* as enjoyable to themselves as instructive to that lady.

'My dear boy,' she said afterwards, 'your friends Lemonier and Vaughan are very interesting. They reminded me a little of Mr. Bunthorne, however, and I think your dear father, who was so fond of 'Patience,' you know, would have called them "jolly utter"; but I daresay they mean very well. I like Mr. Manning,' she went on gaily; 'and do try and see something of young Rayston. He's so good-looking, like his father. He would be quite a nice man for you to travel with. He's so fond of it, he says, and will go, even if it means selling Carthorpe when he comes into it. Oh, and don't go and join that horrid society, whatever it is called.'

‘What horrid society?’ said Cedric, looking none too pleased at the trend of his mother’s observations. He had been inclined to think that the river party had been a success.

‘The society,’ answered his mother, ‘Mr. Lemonier was talking about. He belongs to a society, doesn’t he, or does the society belong to him?’

‘Oh, you mean the “Openhearts,” I suppose?’ The reply was delivered with careless irritation.

Mrs. Readham changed the conversation, but failed during the remainder of her visit to overcome her son’s dissatisfaction at the line she had taken. She left without again referring to the subject of Cedric’s new interests. She was not a woman to push a point of view. She could quite understand a Readham making a fool of himself on any intellectual subject, but she was sufficiently confident that as much of her own nature as had descended to her son would tell in the long run. She contented herself, therefore, with observing in a subsequent letter that apropos of clubs for young men, she remembered a saying of Lord Loughton’s that at the Universities serious reading clubs were necessary to the existence of scholars, but people who could not pretend to scholastic merit should, if they respected good form, have little to do with other than political societies. She left common-sense, a conception of the ludicrous, and such friends as Tom Manning, to bring home to him the wisdom of these views.

Now of all those minor social, literary, and dining clubs, which have always exercised no mean influence on the character and lives of the junior members of a University, none are perhaps so interesting or, to a

certain extent, so dangerous as those whose tenets border on the eccentric.

Outwardly the forms and ceremonies of all these societies—other than the strictly dining clubs—present a somewhat monotonous similarity. Their members meet in each other's rooms, drink a little wine, and, on the invitation of their chairman, proceed with gravity or the reverse to the discussion of private business. So far only are the college clubs moulded on a common plan. The private business over, however, and the reading clubs commence to read, the musical clubs to gladden the night with song, the card clubs to gamble, and the less conventional assemblies to discuss what they believe to be the great questions of the age—namely, to examine the tenets of one or more peculiar cults or religions, or to devote themselves generally in the most platonic and dialectic manner to an interchange of views on 'the Nature of Reality' or 'the Inner Meaning of Things.' In the frankness and apparent sagacity with which the youngest member present will plunge into these speculations lies for the disputants themselves the real charm and value of the meeting, but to the maturer mind few of its attributes will present a greater element of the comic.

In a University somewhat renowned from time to time for its adherence to revolutionary ideas, the existence of youthful societies, steeped in the writings of Walt Whitman and the philosophy of Nietzsche, or who see in Tolstoi the type of universal patriot, would appear hardly surprising. In a seat of learning, moreover, struggling by means of petty social organizations to maintain something of its mediæval position towards religious dogma, counterblasts in the shape of agnostic and atheistic undergraduate societies

could only be regarded as at once natural and salutary. If, however, Oxford colleges now and then formed societies for preserving the name of the author of 'Dorian Gray,' no more unique or ingenious basis for disingenuous discussion could be found than the principles which led in a certain Cambridge college to the formation of the 'Openhearts.'

Fortune had not sent Cedric Readham to that college, yet his own temperament, the very outline of which he most imperfectly understood, prompted him—an athlete, and, as he imagined, frankly unintellectual—to accept an invitation to join the ranks of those whose very invitation embodied a promise sincerely, frankly—in a word, openheartedly—to state their beliefs or convictions on every conceivable subject, human or divine.

Of necessity such a society would at the outset be more or less created by those who rather too early in life were tempted to regard themselves as peculiarly enlightened persons. Experience goes to show that if by the more healthy and perhaps less intelligent members of a college these sorts of men are generally considered smugs and fools, they on their part exhibit an extraordinary readiness to patronize such of the less mentally developed undergraduates as will submit themselves to the process, speaking of them as 'types' of mankind whom it behoves them to study.

That Cedric Readham took his place in their midst affords as much an example of this attitude of mind in them as it does that subconsciously there lurked in Cedric himself some leanings toward independent thought. That this, indeed, was the case his behaviour both within and without the 'Openhearts' amply testified. In the former he proceeded from interest

to enthusiasm in their debates, and that to a degree which in a society containing not a few youthful hypocrites and irresponsible *poseurs* made for prominence. In the ordinary affairs of college life, moreover, these fresh interests of his bore fruit in a marked change of demeanour and of outlook, this in its turn affecting the very pastimes which from boyhood to adolescence had seemed the one centre of his attention. Such a metamorphosis could not fail to prove as gratifying to his new acquaintances as it was discomforting to his former friends, who, for the most part, amused at first, came to regard his attitude towards the athletics of the place as unjustifiable, and, in one so good as he, almost unpatriotic, and by consequence deserving of censure.

Under these circumstances it would not be difficult to imagine that with the majority of his contemporaries his position would tend to become definitely unpopular. That he did not in effect ever quite lose the goodwill of the men of his time he owed to a species of personal charm, intangible enough, which, as he did not realize, so he was debarred from trusting. Yet, if he did not estimate, and so use, this most mysterious of Nature's gifts, it had done its own work in affording him a constant and reliable link with most of his Trinity friends in the person of Tom Manning.

As time wore on Cedric deservedly obtained the reputation of being the cleverest of the *dilettanti* of the place, and that he should maintain a very marked degree of intimacy with one of the most notoriously stupid men of his year was undoubtedly strange, and evoked some little amusement. Yet it was no mere act of fortune, after all, nor was it altogether to be explained on either of the two suppositions which

were usually advanced whenever their obvious friendship fell under the amiable criticism of their colleagues—namely, a mere persistence of old athletic comradeship, or that it afforded a more than usually pronounced example of that mutual attraction of opposites which appeared to be almost a law of Nature. As a matter of fact, there were very human and intelligible reasons why two such outwardly dissimilar people should find no little pleasure in each other's society. Cedric was by nature easy enough to get on with. He liked Tom chiefly by reason of the other's obvious liking for him—it is often thus, some slight concession to our all-pervading vanity. And so it came about that he was content to bear with equanimity the somewhat dull and unimaginative demeanour of his friend in exchange for the society of one who, if he did not understand intellectual enthusiasm, certainly made no effort to combat its manifestations. Nor did Tom Manning refrain from ridiculing the 'Openhearts' merely because of his friendship for Readham. Personally he disliked Lemonier and hated Vaughan, but there lurked in him a certain sort of seriousness. He was in his own small way somewhat opinionated, and although his views were crude, obvious, and primitive to a degree only equalled by the baldness of his method of explaining them, he respected the possession of a greater measure of intellectual powers in others, without, however, making the slightest pretence of understanding it.

They were, besides, rather linked together by companionship during the more exuberant effects of youthful waywardness, and had on one or two occasions made very whole-hearted efforts to experience the primitive stages of passion. Curiously enough,

however, a certain inherent niceness, not wholly unthoughtful, had so far prompted Cedric to draw back where the other, the more commonplace, perhaps, but not the less well-intentioned of the two, had seen fit to go on.

To men of the world it is matter of the commonest experience to find that the study of the principles underlying any given human action is by no means incompatible with an abstinence from putting into practice the action itself. To the youthful intelligence, however, the discussion of vice is ever regarded as a prelude to, at any rate as a reliable indication of a fondness for, vicious pursuits. Also, by a curious inconsistency in human nature, not only do many men in effect prefer the exercise to the discussion of the immoral, but they hardly believe in the depravity of a fellow-creature so long as he refrains from introducing his experiences into conversation.

Thus it was that of the two men Cedric earned a somewhat unenviable reputation amongst those who cared about reputation at all, whilst Manning was universally regarded as an excellent and harmless fellow. Of the latter this, indeed, remained the world's verdict through life. With Cedric it was different. It was impossible for so prominent a man in the college—as by the end of his residence he had undoubtedly become—to escape the ill-repute which the 'Openhearts' enjoyed in the society of the place. No undergraduate association in the University at that time could have begun under better auspices. Even those of the seniors who heard of it thought the idea ingenious or amusing, possibly, too, capable of proving instructive. The logical working out of its system, however, had proved the very reverse, for by

the public exchange of very personal, and often pseudo-psychological, confidences, it had done more than merely sow the seed of a morbidity, which bade fair to spoil that clarity of thought and true sincerity of reason which is the most valuable attribute of a well-ordered intellect. Naturally, too, the more morbid and inquisitive these deliberations became, the more rapidly spread the whole 'movement'—to use their word for fashion.

Had Cedric not become one of their leaders and consequently exposed to the constant adulation of lesser lights, he might, by a reasonable intercourse with the more thoughtful Fellows of his college, have been mentally steadied. As it was, they frankly thought him a prig, and his influence a bad one. They made, therefore, no further advances towards him than college discipline required, and he on his side did not conceal from them a somewhat contemptuous view of what he termed the mere scholar—a man who was content to pass his time in cramped surroundings, a pedagogue who, in the petty details of a scholastic régime, had lost a grip on the larger drama of life.

At twenty-one he had considered himself mature, and, with every one of the earlier simpler ideals of boyhood damaged, with singularly few friends, he had left the University with the intention of appearing before the world in the habit of a profound pessimist, a recluse with a dash of the misanthrope. Upon the dictates of his strong physical side—dictates as they were of real human impulses, a genuine longing for the love and affection of some fellow-creature—he dwelt as might a martyr catching but glimpses of joys which in a better world might be his, but in this never. In the melodramatic aspect of such a position he took a kind of

pleasure, and considered himself at once profound and sincere in realizing and avowing this part of his nature. Like others of his set, he was well read only in the works of such modern thinkers as lent aid to this emotional state of mind. The same idea guided his reading both in poetry and in the more serious forms of fiction.

What was perhaps more important than all this was his sense that study must be at an end for him. He longed to produce, even if his work should leave himself and his public less happy than before. It was characteristic, too, that he did not argue out this position.

In the midst, therefore, of mental and in a certain measure physical restlessness, he produced in the space of four years some three novels, unpalatable, unpopular, appreciated by a few, and by the best of those only because his style was so undeniably attractive as to make what he had to say almost worth the hearing for that sake alone. Like many another man possessing at once strangeness of mind and facility of expression, his views were more often quoted than read, and 'Denmanism'—a word derived from his pseudonym—meant something to many who had read no two pages of his writings.

These works, epoch-making as he believed them to be at the time, were written under his mother's roof, but the process was in a measure disturbed by Mrs. Readham's genial if sarcastic smiles. Secure in her confidence that circumstances and the blood of the Wilmots would shortly bring Cedric to see the error of his ways, she had continued the policy of giving him his head. Thus, when it became plain to her that after leaving Cambridge it was his wish not to pursue a life of what he called aimless travel, but to set about

without delay giving to the world his conception of the universe. Mrs. Readham had smiled as she said : ' Very well, Cedie ' ; and forthwith she pursued the even tenor of her social avocations with unruffled complacency, merely observing from time to time that lone widows who had ' genii ' for sons must expect to go about unescorted by any nearer relation than a cousin. This attitude and her constant description of him as ' my misanthropic child ' left him quite unmoved. Indeed, his mother's ironical references to his life and works only had the effect of heightening the colour of his cynicism, and, in the words of Aunt Janet, of making him more of a prig than ever.

Four years slipped quickly by, and Mrs. Readham was still looking for a revulsion of feeling in her son's state of mind, when she was seized with what was to prove her last illness. Her irrepressible good spirits lasted nearly to the end, giving place at the last to that dogged courage of bearing and that fineness of worldly wisdom in her talk, which had distinguished her at the moment of her husband's death. She refrained from informing her son of the fatality of her disease until the moment at which she felt able to make the most use of this ghastly communication. Cedric was appalled, as much by her strange calmness as by the news itself. The moment she allowed the gaiety to leave her face Cedric felt that something had come into it in its place—something which so altered the well-known features as to leave no room for doubt but that she was dying. At the time he could think of nothing but the meaning of this, although his mother talked incessantly of him and his future, in which she was now forced to resign a guiding hand. But that much of what she said came to him afterwards at

certain days and in certain moods with disheartening force was sufficient testimony to Mrs. Readham's wisdom and unselfishness. She exhibited no insistence at the time, smiling through her pain at his outbursts of affection and dismay, contenting herself with coming back quietly in their talks to that which was the central idea in her mind to the time when she died peaceably enough in her sleep.

Cedric felt, as he said good-bye, for a time at any rate, to the home in which his mother had spent her last days, that his wretchedness would be unbearable, did it not seem to fit into a life already, as it were, somewhat sombre, a greyness begotten of intellectual isolation. The subtle incongruities involved in this mental attitude unfortunately escaped him.

CHAPTER IV

MR. AND MRS. MANNING

‘ You’RE a stranger, you know.’

‘ Yes, I know I am. Did you expect me to come ?’

‘ Well, I thought you would.’

‘ Oh, you make a distinction ! Well, how is your wife ? Not away ?’

‘ Yes.’

They stood together by the fireside. The warm light shone on their faces, causing them to glow in luminous contrast to the sombre surroundings of a fog-bound London day. So different in outward aspect were these two men, so different in the essentials of character, and yet by all the laws of friendship so meet a pair. Cedric Readham was the handsomer man. His face in the twenty-five years of his life had undergone more changes than it ought to have done. Boyish in outline and detail, it was, nevertheless, clouded with an air of almost elderly melancholy. Tom Manning was taller than Cedric, a heavier man, too. Square-jawed, massive, he looked what he was—an abler man on the football-field than anywhere else. A typically good fellow, he was ruddy and of a cheerful countenance, thus combining, as his friends observed, much of the essential charms of a David with the physical advantages of a Goliath. He did not pretend to

be intellectually brilliant, but he was, in his own estimation, shrewd, far-seeing, and business-like, pre-eminently a man of the world. In reality, however, he had never properly emerged from the pig-headedness of schooldays. He was in many ways still a boy, but without the boy's ability or inclination to become the possessor of a greater degree of brain-power.

Cedric saw at a glance that Manning was enjoying what has come to be called 'a fit of the blues'—that vague, but none the less real, disorder known to our ancestors as the 'spleen.' Time was when the symptoms and sensations peculiar to this complaint possessed a certain commercial value, when, rocked in a literary reverie, the patient sufferer was able to obtain both solace and monetary consolation by describing his state of mind in language dear to the magazines. *Tempora mutantur*. The *Spectator* of to-day is not that of yesterday. It is soon learnt that an attack of the distemper, even if recounted with all the aid of Parnassus, cannot hope to draw from the wisdom of the *Times* or the experience of the *Lancet* a greater measure of sympathy than the editor's regrets.

It is not, however, so very evident that, had Mr. Manning been born in the reign of good Queen Anne, and custom adorned his head with a periwig, he would have been any better off for an outlet to his emotions. Albeit a man in reality eager enough to unburden himself on occasions, he possessed so many cross-currents in his disposition that he was very rarely able to bring himself, in the language of the vulgar, to the scratch. Moreover, he was fully conscious that on the few occasions when he had overcome this initial difficulty, his bearing had been so ungainly and his language so

halting as to detract very seriously from the interest and utility of the outburst.

So far, the wife of his bosom had been the only one whom he had installed as confessor, and inasmuch as the pent-up volume of his thoughts had mainly concerned himself and that lady, his difficulty at these moments had been in effect less than imagination might have conceived.

But it had been very considerable for all that, and his face had often remained puffed and red for some three hours after Mrs. Manning had called him her 'dear, stupid old boy.' At first this happy combination of epithets had seemed to him exquisitely facetious in form and highly endearing in design. Of late, however, there had seemed to him to be an element of patronage in the tone, an almost amused note in the voice, far from soothing to his wayward spirit. By consequence his airs of patient martyrdom had tended to increase in duration, and finally, it must be conceded, to partake somewhat of the character and nature of sulks. When he looked back at the days of courtship, not the least dispiriting part of the business was the recollection of the highly satisfactory outcome of those few moments of dejection which he had then allowed himself. Indeed, so beautiful and affecting were the immediate results of his indulgence in this dangerous pastime, that they seemed almost to warrant a repetition of some show of despondency at stated and regular intervals.

By the end of the honeymoon these occurrences had been of sufficient frequency to promote a certain conventional formula without impairing in the author's view either their efficacy or their charm. The most trivial incident coming upon a certain temper of mind

was sufficient to provoke an appearance of discord. Besides a general air of lassitude and depression, coupled with a somewhat forced degree of unconcern to all and everything in which he might be supposed to take an interest, Tom would exhibit a disposition to do nothing, to utter no more than monosyllabic replies to his wife's most brilliant sallies, to keep his eyes rigidly averted from her face, to mistake or leave unnoticed every small and usually effective effort which she made to please him. In the event of these symptoms of the stricken soul not bringing his wife to tears and capitulation within the space of a few hours, recourse was had to a system of wan smiles produced apparently with great effort, and with a wholly gratuitous idea of being kind to the last. On the first thirty occasions these devices had proved amply sufficient for their purpose, and an extremely loving little woman, by nature undemonstrative, had been won to an outburst of wholly unrestrained affection and concern.

At the first appearance of a cloud upon her husband's brow, always unexpected on her part, it would be, 'Is there anything wrong, dear?' and, later, 'You aren't angry with me, are you? You look so unhappy.' Up to this point she would be met by a series of replies more or less negative in form, but all of them open to an affirmative interpretation.

In early days these episodes swept swiftly to a dénouement. 'Tom, please don't be angry with me. What is the matter?' From a hand on his shoulder and these accents of distress uttered from behind his chair, he would finally be treated to a wife on his knee, and a flushed little face and two wide baby eyes, filling with tears, pushed close to his. Tom's confession to himself that he was a brute seemed a sufficient intel-

lectual atonement for pursuing a policy fraught with such deliriously exquisite results. As he never outwardly owned that he was in the wrong, he felt sufficiently assured that his wife's temporary unhappiness would receive ample compensation in her mind from his magnanimity and subsequent caresses.

Inoculation may be a very useful operation for society, but when applied to any particular patient for any considerable length of time, it will tend to render him immune from even its primary effects. The inoculation of an individual with a spurious and unnecessary distress affords no exception to the rule. Thus it was that, as time wore on, Manning became face to face with the fact that each and all his blandishments of wretchedness failed to procure the alluring climax. Anxious as his wife always was to remain on affectionate terms with him, there came a time when she would do no more than meet him half-way ; and, inasmuch as this attitude of mind did not lessen the duration of his fits, he was led to fear that she might in a certain eventuality go not even so far as that. The situation at these times led to the adoption of a formula akin to that of small-sword exercise, in so far as it embodied a complete system of cut, thrust, and parry, all clearly defined and well known to each of the combatants.

Now, by that curious inconsistency in human nature which the strong-minded call 'cussedness,' Mrs. Manning's refusal to adopt her former tactics was regarded by her husband as a further example of a perverse spirit, and therefore, when once in the mood, he would prolong his sullenness to an extent which he knew even at the moment would some day prove to be wholly insufferable.

They had been married only two years, but these 'regrettable incidents' and the constant anxiety as to their recurrence was already marring what should in all reason be a happy enough existence. He was one of the few to whom the phrase 'madly in love' might with justice be applied. The knowledge that he was for ever playing the fool and wasting the opportunities of tying his wife to him by a perpetual bond of friendship and regard added not a little to his discomfort. But, by a like flaw in his nature, such knowledge by no means promoted the abandonment of these fits of ill-humour, for he was always expecting his wife to get tired of him on this account, and consequently was perpetually suspecting her of doing so.

From time to time there was always someone to whom he thought she took a fancy, and although at first he did, to do him justice, make an effort to conceal these, the most ignoble of his reflections, yet from an intuitive woman they could not long be hid. The net result on her mind and bearing was that she vacillated between a nervous apprehension of his views and a resolute determination to neglect them. Whenever they went, or whomever they met, there was always this contrariety in her manner, and in cases where her husband really liked some man of their acquaintance, she was sorely perplexed to please without offending him. Latterly, however, she had been particularly undemonstrative in private, and peculiarly self-possessed in society; and since she carried herself thus both in peace and war, Tom became seriously alarmed as to the whole sequel of his married life.

Two days ago he had, this time without the usual prelude of a day's sulking, made a strong appeal for some display of that affection due to a husband so

loving as he. Upon this Blanche had looked worried, then impatient, and had finally left the room, observing that she had 'something better to do than to talk nonsense half the morning.'

Tom spent five minutes crumpling the newspaper, jingling his keys, and getting himself into a condition of unreasoning anger. He then followed her to her room. To the long tirade of ill-chosen words which ensued she made no sort of reply, pinning on her hat, as Tom could see from the glass, with the utmost coolness, or, as he called it, with a pig-headed and obstinate look on her face. She begged him on the landing to be kind enough to remember the servants, and with that took her way to Bond Street, leaving her husband a victim to unabated fury. He was too demoralized, or, as he put it, too upset, to go to the City that day. He resolved in his heart to await her home-coming and reopen the cause of controversy. He meditated a slight change of tactics, however, feeling that a cold glare and a hoarse, broken voice would better meet the gravity of the occasion.

From two until half-past six that afternoon he contented himself with rehearsing his part of the dialogue. But by that time her prolonged absence was causing him no little anxiety. Inasmuch as he had expected her back soon after three, he enjoyed the sensations of a man with whom an appointment has been broken. He wanted his little scene to be over and done with. It was making him, he said to himself, feel quite ill. He consulted a looking-glass. The veins on his forehead were certainly unduly prominent ; he had done nothing but smoke all day long ; his face was a dullish grey, with patches of pink in the wrong places. At no other time would he have derived any satisfaction from so

deplorable an aspect. As it was, he chartered a hansom and drove triumphantly to the Empress Club.

He inquired for his wife. He waited, as it seemed, an interminable time, very anxious, very perplexed. A servant arrived with the information that Mrs. Manning was entertaining some friends to dinner. Did Mrs. Manning expect him?

Tom shamefacedly admitted that she did not. But he would not have her disturbed; he would leave a message. With that grave servant there in front of him, it seemed the only thing to do.

In a perfect bewilderment of fury and dismay he forthwith indicted a short and stinging letter, the details of which he was not very careful to remember. Then he drove to his club, devoured a four-course dinner in something under fifteen minutes, subsequently indulging in twice as many whiskies-and-sodas as were good for him, and did not return to his domicile until hard on one in the morning, having by that time lost himself and his partner some three pounds ten, and leaving with a generally expressed opinion that he ought to take bridge more seriously.

The effect of stimulants had not altogether worn off when his cab stopped at his door, and he was perfectly ready for battle. He did not pretend in the light of her last act of independence to gauge the probable nature of his reception. He entered their room, however, with some show of consideration for a possible sleeper. He closed the door with much nicety, treading across the floor as silently as circumstances would allow. On reaching the dressing-table he ventured on a slight but perceptible cough. After repeating this effort in a listening attitude three or four times, each time with an increasing volume and distinctness,

and meeting with no other response than the ticking of the clock was prepared to give him, he boldly switched on the light. The bed was unoccupied.

He experienced an extreme shock.

'Good God !' he exclaimed. He looked all round the room, his hand still on the switch. What was wrong with the dressing-table ? Why, her brushes and scent-bottle were not in their places !

He went thumping downstairs, turning on the light at every stair-head. He rang the bell loudly from his study, and in the interim between that and a servant's hurried arrival, searched for a note or some other indication of his wife's conduct. Nothing of the sort was to be seen. A servant, partially dressed, tapped on the door. For a moment Tom contemplated the abrupt question, 'Where's Mrs. Manning ?' But self-respect was at his elbow. He said, therefore, with the air of imparting a piece of tragic information :

'Mrs. Manning is not in the house, Jane ! I can't think what can have happened. When did you see her last ?'

'Oh, Mrs. Manning told me to tell you, sir, if you asked, that she had gone to Fairfield.'

'Oh !' Tom felt himself capable of no more for the moment. She had gone to her mother's ! Jane inquired whether there was anything she could do for him, and went back to bed. Fortunately for her position, perhaps, she restrained the smile that was eager to show itself on her face until she was once again in the sanctity of her own room.

In the light of the morning, such as it was—a dense yellow fog prevailed outside — his wife's disappearance shaped itself in Tom's mind as the culminating tragedy of an unfortunate marriage. His lonely

position at a large square table, littered with dishes and preserves revolting to the broken mind and disordered stomach, formed at the outset of the day the worst possible conditions under which to attempt a calm and dispassionate view of the situation. From time to time thoughts of violence shot through his aching head. Many a would-be suicide is, however, deterred from taking the irrevocable step by the uncertainty of witnessing the result. Tom was, nevertheless, fully prepared to take a reasonable amount of poison, so long as he could be assured of recovery shortly after his distracted wife should have reached his bedside.

In these desperate reflections the first part of the morning wore rapidly away without any communication from his departed spouse.

By noon life began to appear insupportable without certainty as to her whereabouts and intentions. He therefore resolved upon a diplomatic form of telegram. There still lay in his mind the idea of a reconciliation in which he might play the injured party. For this reason he abstained from giving away his position by displaying the agony he undoubtedly felt. After much deliberation he telegraphed as follows :

'Should like to know your plans.—TOM.'

At the same time he handed in another telegram, addressed :

'Readham, Chipton, Archester. Must have you lunch to-morrow.—MANNING.'

A variety of reasons had led him to send this second message. He felt desperately lonely, and did not know how long this isolation would last. In any case

a crisis had arrived in which someone must be consulted. He had turned over in his mind several names. 'But Cedric,' thought he, 'is jolly clever. I'd like to know what he would do if he were me.' In a mixture of hope, anxiety, and expectancy, he passed the early afternoon in trying to read, strumming the piano, jumping to the window at every post, assured on each occasion of the arrival of a telegraph-boy. Darkness descended, and still not a message. He dared not go to the club in case the telegram should arrive in his absence, and so he waited in his study, a miserable and piteous object.

He was sipping his soup at a quarter before eight, endeavouring hard to appear undismayed before the servants, when a telegram arrived.

'Oh! I expect this is from Mrs. Manning,' he said aloud, with a supreme effort of composure.

'Delighted.'—READHAM.'

'Damn!' said Tom quite audibly.

The servant handed him some fish.

After dinner, in which he ate but little and drank a great deal, some of his valour and indignation returned. He determined that if she came back that night she should certainly not find him there to receive her, and he would leave no message. He repaired to the club and played billiards. By eleven o'clock, however, a subsidence of alcoholic effect coincided with the return of anxious feelings. He could no longer keep away from Sloane Street.

Never had he approached his home in greater trepidation. Blanche would surely have returned by now! He did not think she could have taken enough clothes to stay away for long. Oh yes, she would certainly

be back. Curiously enough, he no longer considered what he would say or do at the moment of greeting ; it was just a question of driving home as quickly as possible and satisfying himself. After paying the cabman, he stood outside the porch a moment and craned his head to catch sight of any light from the upper windows. Never had a house looked more melancholy, more desolate. He dashed inside. A few letters stood in the tray, but no telegram. He rang the bell. He would not be heard running upstairs.

‘I rather expect Mrs. Manning back to-night,’ said he, fumbling at some papers, with his back to the servant. ‘Has she come yet?’

‘No, sir.’

Tom drank some neat brandy and went straight to bed.

By the time Cedric Readham had put in an appearance on the following morning Tom had schooled himself into an affected calm. He was profoundly wretched, however, since two days had now elapsed without one word, sign, or token as to his wife’s state of mind. He might have gone to Fairfield, but a multitude of ill-defined but very essential reasons suggested that such a step might make matters even worse than they were now. He counted the minutes to Cedric’s arrival, yet from breakfast onwards he could think of no obvious and easy way of introducing the subject of his misfortune. As it turned out, Cedric saved him the trouble.

‘I’m so sorry to have missed Mrs. Manning,’ he said. ‘You must remember me to her. Is she away for long?’

Tom winced slightly as he endeavoured to frame a suitable reply. ‘To tell you the truth, old chap, I don’t quite know.’

The extremely subdued tone of his voice struck Cedric as so curious that he involuntarily shot at Tom an inquiring glance.

He remembered the imperative wording of Manning's telegram.

'She's not ill, is she? You look a little bit worried.'

'I . . . worried?' said Tom. He could not see that this was helping him. He suffered waves of conflicting sensations. At one time he would embrace, at another stave off, the opportunity for disclosure.

'Well, you do seem a bit off colour,' Cedric resumed. 'Is there anything the matter?'

Tom got up from his chair, took a Herculean pipe from his smoking-table, filled it, lit it with great deliberation, and in absolute silence. The fog seemed to thicken outside, the room to look infinitely cheerless, and the slow ticking of the clock to be almost maddening. Tom set the poker between the bars.

'There is something the matter,' he observed. Confidences were, he thought, never very easy between men. He retreated again. 'I'm just off colour,' he repeated, as if to impress the other with a due sense of his happily inspired diagnosis. He gazed rigidly into the fire.

Cedric examined as much of his friend's face as he could see from the chair. 'May I have a cigarette?' said he. 'We have some little time before lunch, haven't we?' He went and stood for a moment at the smoking-table, regarding Tom carefully over the light of his match. Evidently the visit was not to have so much of the commonplace about it, after all. Some minutes elapsed. Then he said, with an odd feeling of shyness, which he feared somehow was

creeping into his voice : ' Couldn't you tell me what's up ?—I mean, if you want to. I might help. I should like to.'

Tom turned so woebegone a countenance in his direction as for the moment looked almost comic.

' My dear fellow, what is it ?'

' It's about Blanche,' said Tom, in a hollow, sepulchral voice. He repeated the last two words in an even more funereal tone.

' Not ill ?'

Tom shook his head. ' I don't know,' he said.

' Not know ? What do you mean ?'

' *She's gone.*'

' Gone ?'

' I . . . I think she has.'

Cedric felt absolutely bewildered. ' My dear chap,' he said, rising to his feet, ' for God's sake do tell me what you mean. I can't think . . . I—really——'

Tom got up. ' I heard a hansom,' he said irrelevantly.

' Oh, I've heard any number,' said Cedric, ' but as you can't see any in this weather, just come here and try and be a little clear. ' You can't mean your wife has——'

' Damn it, I do !' shouted Tom, coming close. ' Is that you, Jane ?' he exclaimed, looking over Cedric's shoulder.

' Lunch is served, sir. Mrs. Manning will be down directly.'

' Oh ! oh !' Cedric told him afterwards that he would never be able to repeat the precise tone in which he uttered these words.

For a moment the two men looked at one another. ' I don't know——' began Tom in a murmur.

'No more do I,' interrupted Cedric; 'what the deuce——?'

Mrs. Manning rattled into the room.

'Oh, do excuse me,' said she, giving Cedric her hand. 'This awful fog—how did you find your way here? What do you think of Tom?' she continued over her shoulder as she led the way into the dining-room; 'have you cheered him? He's not been at all himself these last two days. Have you, my husband?'—this with much archness across the table. 'He's a most difficult man to look after; he's so obstinate, you know, and so unwise. The night before last, for instance, in spite of not being what he calls up to form, he came in at one in the morning.'

Tom looked infinitely disconcerted. 'You didn't hear me,' he muttered.

'No, but the servants did.'

'Ah! as long as he didn't disturb you,' said Cedric, feeling totally at a loss to understand quite what part he was taking in this wholly unintelligible drama.

'No; it's a funny thing,' said Mrs. Manning, in her sweetest tones, 'that although I'm not usually what I call a first-rate sleeper, I've never slept better than just these two last nights since Tom has been so run down.'

Tom felt and looked utterly confounded. He bolted his food, and rolled somewhat red eyes in Cedric's direction. He could not think what would happen next, and was two or three times on the point of shamming some acute disorder and retiring incontinently to his room. He mentally called Heaven to witness that he had not really wanted to tell Cedric anything. Cedric, he thought, had shown signal want of tact in pressing him as he had done. He allowed his wife to entertain their guest with all the small-talk

at her disposal, whilst he ruminated on the lucky and the unlucky events of the morning. These reflections by no means tended to increase his good-humour. He drank his wine freely, and finally resolved upon carrying the war into the enemy's country. 'Where have you been all this time, Blanche?' he asked.

'Shopping, of course,' replied Mrs. Manning imperturbably.

Cedric thought he saw daylight. Poor old Tom! On such a day anyone might worry. 'I think he thought you were lost, Mrs. Manning,' he said good-humouredly.

'And so I was,' responded his hostess, with a laugh.

Tom flushed with pride as a highly diplomatic notion crossed his mind. 'Why didn't you send me a wire, or something?'

'Well, dear, I really thought you'd be too much occupied with your own cares to be bothering much about me. I really hope, Tom,' she resumed, turning to Cedric, 'that you have persuaded Mr. Readham to stay a day or two with us. I think you have a promise to fulfil in that respect, haven't you, Mr. Readham? And we've seen nothing of you for such a time.'

'You're very kind, Mrs. Manning, but I——'

'Oh, of course you can't take your long solitary walks while this weather lasts. The thinker will just have to play games with a patient and his nurse. Now, do stay.'

'Well, you know——' Mrs. Manning looked very pretty, but he lacked encouragement from the master of the house. He looked at Tom. The latter had quickly resolved the unexpected proposal in his mind, and, after all, it seemed a highly convenient way of smoothing somewhat troubled waters.

'Oh yes,' he said; 'you can't go back to Chipton for a day or two, at any rate.'

Cedric could not but feel that his acceptance of the invitation would fit in admirably with his resolution to let himself glide away on the stream of things. He consented, therefore, and over his coffee and cigar took occasion to thank Tom again for the kindness of offering him so complete a rest and change.

'I've been fearfully idle, you know, Tom,' he said. 'I envy you your definite aims, your home, and—but for the tenth commandment—your wife!'

'H'm!' growled Tom. 'You always seem to me to have a pretty good time. Anyhow,' he went on, 'whatever's the matter now, I'm sure it's your own fault. You always used to mope about, and think and write, and so on, and a chap can't go on like that for ever and not get bored.'

Tom was very loyal to his friend, and had always religiously told people that he considered Mark Denman's books 'devilishly clever,' but in his heart he could never understand how a man like Cedric—a sportsman, too—could want to probe things about, turn everything upside down, and produce stories in which, as he expressed it, nothing happened.

'I admit,' said Cedric in reply, 'that I have my moments of despondency, a condition I rather fancy to have noticed in the lives of some of my acquaintances. Did you ever feel a bit off colour, Tom?'

'Look here, old man,' said Tom, rising with some assumption of dignity from the chair, 'you don't know what women are.'

'No; but I should like to know.'

'You used to say you hated them—not clever enough, and all that sort of rot.'

'Ah ! but, my dear fellow, you make me see the error of my ways.'

Tom grunted.

'I thought Mrs. Manning looked very well,' remarked Cedric reflectively.

'Oh, she's all right. I say, why not play footer next Saturday for Southdale ?'

Cedric was as much struck by the change in tone as by the nature of the request. 'I haven't played for ages, except in village games ; besides, I'm getting too old.'

'All right ; but what do you propose doing on Sunday ?' queried Tom. 'I must play on Saturday, so Blanche will have to entertain you. She's read some of your books lately, so you'll get on all right. But what about Sunday ?' He seemed anxious to keep the conversation on this subject.

'Oh, I'm in your hands.'

'I know,' exclaimed Tom suddenly. 'Some people I know in Chelsea would amuse you. You meet all sorts of artists there, and chaps who write plays—just your lot, you know—and there's a very pretty girl. By Jove ! you'd like her.'

Cedric expressed acquiescence in the programme, and was prepared to admit to himself that he had never felt in a more rational and serene frame of mind than he did at that moment, in spite of the fog, their enigmatical table-talk, and Tom's unaccountable behaviour earlier in the day. And so, having telegraphed for the apparel necessary for a short visit, he passed a congenial and contented afternoon, and thoroughly enjoyed Mrs. Manning's songs and the game of cut-throat bridge which whiled away the evening.

After he had retired to rest he was somewhat dis-

turbed by a murmur of voices from the adjoining chamber. It was plain that Mr. and Mrs. Manning were engaged in mutual explanations. He knew that voice. One does not share rooms in college with such as Tom Manning without learning almost every intonation. Tom never pitched his words in so high a key unless unduly excited. He also thought he could hear Tom's heavy tread, indicating a discussion of such magnitude as to preclude the possibility of the combatants removing their boots before its conclusion. The idea of Tom being in any respect a married man had always struck him as a distinctly comic notion, but the spectacle of Tom perplexed and worried, with such a pretty wife, was too diverting. Cedric laughed in his bed.

Then gradually thoughts returned to himself, and this sudden and unexpected sojourn under a strange roof. He remembered the day when first Tom had shown him his house, and the almost ludicrous manner in which he had attempted to bring home to his friend the true meaning and importance of married life. It had been as though Tom honestly believed himself to be the first man who had signed the marriage register and, a few hours later, taken his bride to Paris. Once or twice in the last few months Cedric himself had wondered whether he would ever marry, but it had always come upon him that for the present, at any rate, marriage did not mean much to him. Now, as he lay in bed, thoughts such as these came to mind, and he gave himself up to reverie. Manning had his home—was he ever to have one of his own? The row of lights at Ostend seemed to be standing out in the dark room; once again he saw the weeping girl's face, again the beautiful woman, the same and yet not the

same, dining with Lord Sothernmere. With something of a shock he came to himself, and endeavoured to discover the links in his chain of thought ; then, embittered, he resolutely thought of other matters. Certainly things were turning up, after all. Far removed, indeed, was life with these simple people from the lonely but rather grand egoism in which he had indulged for so long. The ideal of the hermit is perhaps not a lofty one, yet it is an ideal ; every detail of his life is brought into conformity with it. It was almost absurd, Cedric reflected, that one should take pleasure in the mere abandonment of a strait yet definite existence for a life akin to that of the seedling blown whithersoever the wind listeth. However, for a short time at any rate, it would surely be worth doing. Although he was but sleeping in an upper room of a Kensington house, the property of a newly-married couple, the morrow and the next day loomed before him fraught with as many possible adventures as if he were sleeping aboard a South Sea trader in the reign of King George the First.

He fell asleep to dream of Mrs. Puddock standing on the prostrate figure of Tom Manning, to whose debilitated countenance she pointed in exemplification of a long and ably worded warning addressed mainly to her husband—who showed a remarkable resemblance to Lord Sothernmere—but largely to himself.

CHAPTER V

THE SHERIDAN ESTABLISHMENT

MRS. SHERIDAN was 'at home' on alternate Thursdays. She was also at home on Sunday afternoons; but if the former entertainments tended to become more and more dully conventional, the latter became correspondingly popular with her friends, for it was Mrs. Sheridan's practice to ask all those she really cared about to come on Sundays; and so delightfully informal were these gatherings that there was little incentive to appear on any other occasion. Mrs. Sheridan was an intelligent, charming, and good-looking woman, and by consequence an admirable hostess when surrounded by her real friends.

Herself the daughter of an artist, a sincere enthusiast, yet a man in whom the freshness and vivacity of English thought had done more than counter-balance the effect of the French school in which he had been largely trained, she had been carefully, if unconventionally, brought up. They had lived in a clever, impulsive, generous set of artists and *littérateurs*—a set, too, in which brains never passed for genius, nor a pose for a conviction. Free and untrammelled by the dictates of petty fashion, their life and work had been very largely appreciated as a sincere expression of study as well as of personal intuition. Enjoying

as she did both the wit and wisdom of these people, she had grown up an essentially good woman, in whom thought and action were controlled by ethical rather than religious restraint. Her marriage with Mr. Sheridan had been avowedly a love-match, and as such had carried with it the usual necessity of choosing between one good and another. To most people Mr. Sheridan appeared the hard, painstaking, puritanical sort of man, apt, apparently, to mistake happiness for frivolity, and to see in the sensuous always the sensual. If, then, Mrs. Sheridan seemed sometimes afraid of him, it was because her fondness for him could not altogether outweigh her knowledge that he could never understand her. Perhaps, too, she realized that she had never understood him.

Later in their married life her husband had consented to take a small house in Chelsea, which had been the home of her girlhood. From that moment gradually, yet unobtrusively, the ugly stiff furniture and gloomy religious pictures, which to Mr. Sheridan combined worldly comfort with the opportunity for spiritual reminders, had given way to such scraps of old-world bric-à-brac as an artist loves to gather round him. In these, marking as they did a sort of return to her old home, Mrs. Sheridan found consolation for all she had foregone in the days succeeding her courtship. People who knew them well said that her daughter's obviously Bohemian nature had received no little assistance from these and other *objets d'art*, so often discussed and admired by the people who, in their new Chelsea home, soon rallied round them. In fact, despite Mr. Sheridan's inclinations, his wife, on returning to her old neighbourhood, had more or less picked up the threads of many a former literary or

artistic friendship. His house on Sunday afternoons became well known for a gathering of interesting, clever people, who all moved in much the same circles, and his daughter Ruth seemed destined from her babyhood to become an 'out and out Bohemian.'

From the first Mr. Sheridan regarded most of his wife's friends with distrust, and their Sunday gatherings as far too worldly. He endeavoured to counteract the dissipating influence of such society upon his child by an assiduous course of religious instruction. Unfortunately, however, the only day when he himself was free for devotional purposes was that upon which his wife kept open house for the more secular of their acquaintances. Any number of small domestic troubles and little scenes, beginning with screams and ending in incarceration in the nursery, centred round the child's indomitable preference for the fun and laughter of the drawing-room to the gloomy virtue of the parish church. On this, then, the burning question of Ruth's upbringing, her father suffered alternate triumphs and defeats.

One of the best stories told against him concerned a singular escapade of Miss Ruth's at the age of twelve. The fact was, that Mr. Sheridan's small literary gifts were entirely devoted to the writing of specious tracts possessing sprightly titles by no means borne out by the gloomy nature of their texts. On a certain Saturday afternoon at the seaside two earnest friends of his were conducting a children's special service mission on the sands. A rival entertainment, however, was being provided by a troupe of niggers, with every one of whom his small daughter was already upon intimate terms. Mr. Sheridan essayed to carry her off, hymn-book in hand, to listen to the words of grace. The

child elected for the niggers, and expressed her determination of 'singing all wrong' if she were coerced in the matter. Mr. Sheridan was surprised at her ; his wife exhorted her to be a good girl. Ruth said she hated good girls, but liked bad boys. Moreover, she threw out broad hints of knowing 'lots of awful swear-words,' with which she evidently hoped to break up the meeting if occasion required. It ended, of course, in Mr. Sheridan's complete defeat. But a week or two later he took occasion to read aloud to his family his latest tract, which bore the significant title, *Satan and the Tambourine ; or, the Valley of Bones*. Considerable numbers of this pamphlet had been printed, and several bundles had been sent to him. His family accepted his reading aloud without any great show of enthusiasm, but Ruth certainly shared her father's delight when in the local paper they beheld the announcement that a large number of tracts by a Mr. Sheridan had been found washing at high tide over the marine parade. Mr. Sheridan saw in this circumstance another ingenious plan whereby the crew of a mission ship strove to touch the hearts of heathen landsmen ; but his daughter, who had paid a very private visit to the foreshore early the preceding morning, had her own views on the subject.

In after years she often wondered at her worthy parent's blindness on this as on other occasions. It savoured of the improbable, and yet he was at all times so headstrong as to refuse to harbour soberer second thoughts. A careful man, he trusted his powers of judgment ; but an unconscious obstinacy led him to place implicit confidence in first impressions.

As time wore on, it became more and more certain that Ruth only attended to the needs of the soul out

of deference to her father's wishes ; nor did this prevent her from utilizing the hours so spent in concocting a number of pleasantries on the subject of religious observances in general and English Protestantism in particular, with which she regaled those friends of her own age who at all shared her opinions. At the age of fifteen her father could not but think her getting terribly out of hand. But he continually comforted himself with the reflection that she was still only a child in whom animal spirits predominated, that when she became older she would put away childish things—in a word, that all would come well. Ruth might be a child, but to most people she appeared almost precociously grown up. She was quick to see the charms in many of the pursuits and occupations of those of their set who talked enthusiastically of life and its objects. The existence of a properly brought up young girl, such as it pleased her father to describe, appeared to her intolerable, and she took every opportunity of expressing her determination to do something definite, and enjoy life as much as possible. She would begin, she thought, by going to an art school, learning to draw, and so, she told herself, incidentally to make her own friends in her own way. Poor Mrs. Sheridan was in a difficult position ; she was most anxious to keep the peace, but could not, when it came to the point, say much in opposition to a scheme which so obviously reflected her own nature, and in which there seemed but little harm. Ruth was perfectly capable of defying both parents, had it been necessary, but since one of them was of her own mind in the matter, there was no stopping her, and to the school she went.

Mr. Sheridan was more than distressed—he was angry.

‘That a daughter of mine . . .’ he would begin, only to be interrupted by his wife or Ruth herself, who, when she liked, could adopt a coaxing tone usually by no means unsuccessful with her father. ‘My friends . . .’ he would continue ; but he was not accorded a hearing. His friends, said Ruth, would not care two straws what she did, a statement, perhaps, more convincing than true.

And Mr. Sheridan realized that opposition on his part was useless, and, if carried beyond a certain point, likely to lead to a singularly unchristian family feud. He was at bottom a kind-hearted man, in whom an excess of religious zeal made up for a paucity of intellectual power. He gloried in upholding the Church of his country, and the tenets of that branch of it to which locality rather than independent study had brought him. Sincere in so far as he never attempted to get the better of his conscience, his mind was bigoted, his temper short, and his dealings with men and things marked by a complete absence of a sense of the ludicrous. He was consequently wholly unaware of how often his attitude of solemn disgust or pious indignation added zest to the flippancy of his daughter’s demeanour, thereby increasing the interest and enjoyment of Sundays at 138, Tite Street.

Everybody liked the Sheridans’ drawing-room. Only those who understood its history found the dining-room bearable at all. Here were gathered together all that remained of what had once been described as a magnificent walnut suite ; here, too, a more than usually pathetic *St. Cecilia* made her last stand, and bore with the acme of Christian patience the somewhat rude and inquisitive gaze of the *Monarch of the Glen*. Here, surrounded by the ideal of a long-since

altered Tottenham Court Road, Mr. Sheridan sat, smoked, and produced at intervals the tracts, which during their generally brief lives met with no small adventures. The room with its decoration was tacitly regarded, when not being used for the family meals, as his particular sanctum. In tolerating it the rest of the household felt itself entitled to demand his forbearance in the furniture and arrangement of the drawing-room, which contained stray cabinets and tables, neither consistently collected nor systematically placed ; odd bits of china, porcelain, silver, and pewter, and a heterodox collection of pictures, prints, and original drawings, so hung as to be eminently delightful to the artist, whilst irritating to the connoisseur. Yet the whole effect of the room was strikingly good, and very few people who visited it ever left without having something to admire, some little effect which awakened one of their interests.

Of the many people who were constant visitors at the Sheridans', some few penetrated into another and even more interesting apartment. This was the room in which Ruth passed whatever time she was forced to spend in her own company. The servants would have liked to call it her boudoir ; its owner, however, preferred to describe it as her den. Its walls were plastered with all sorts of modern posters, original sketches, caricatures—any number of which were of her own father, though it must be admitted that that gentleman was ignorant upon this point—photographs of her friends, and athletic groups, the latter by no means only of girls' clubs. It was not a very comfortable room. There were only two chairs and a settee. In one corner a Greek athlete gazed oddly at the fencing foils of a later age, whilst the head of Clytie peeped demurely from a

pile of hockey-sticks and golf-clubs. A rough book-case was littered with French and German novels, note-books, and undestroyed letters. The only object, indeed, in the room which appeared to be at all reverently treated was a miniature case standing upon a small satin-wood table, and containing quite a large number of editions of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyám*, in all sorts of bindings, from the richest morocco to the commonest paper. Into this room Mr. Sheridan rarely ventured. He heartily disapproved of everything in it, and regarded it as exemplifying a perverse state of mind.

'He would begin to tidy things, if he were to come in here,' Ruth had remarked once, 'and I could never find anything in a really tidy room.'

Time passed, and even Mrs. Sheridan noticed an obvious, and in a manner unexpected, difference in her daughter after the latter had once settled down to the life of an art student. The girl had taken to her new studies, as has already been said, with a dual intention—that of acquiring an art, and of making friends amongst her colleagues. At the end of a year the latter object had been more rapidly attained than the former, and the Sheridan household was somewhat inundated by male and female students of London's *Quartier Latin*. Hence the posters, the drawings, the enthusiastic perusal of whatever they talked about as clever, or, as they more often would have it, brilliant. In the summer it became noticeable that her excursions into the country with certain friends for the purpose of sketching, more often than not ended in tennis rather than drawing, and of her fellow-students it was remarked that she preferred those who had some degree of athletic leanings.

Certain girls of Ruth's acquaintance, conscious,

perhaps, of their own inferiority, accused her of a wanton disregard for her own sex, and of making an absurd fetich of masculine prowess. It was certainly true that most of her friends were of the male gender, nor, by the time she was in her nineteenth year, had she confided in any woman except her own mother; somehow, the sympathy which women in general had to offer seemed so meagre and only to touch those attributes of her nature which she regarded as weaknesses. On the other hand, she made a number of quite extraordinarily intimate friendships with boys as well as with men of her own generation, entering with a frankness and interest into their ideas and pursuits to a degree utterly surprising to them. To herself such an attitude of mind was so natural, and so much a part of her own nature, that she could hardly understand how any girl could live otherwise.

Yet Ruth Sheridan was no fool. She knew she was to a certain extent wasting time, and that her drawing had done little more than give her some slight insight into other people's work. It had, however, done something towards systematizing her innate love of the beautiful in nature. No one could help remarking that most of her friends possessed considerable physical attractions, and, indeed, it is doubtful if, with all her sincere admiration for the intellectual, she would not have fairly readily resigned herself to the society of a really handsome fool rather than devote herself to an ill-looking genius. It was plain to the merest acquaintance that there never was a more straightforward girl than Ruth Sheridan, and, as such, she perfectly realized that an attractive girl, such as she knew herself to be, was, generally speaking, going dangerously near the fire in admitting a number of young men to so close a

degree of intimacy. She knew also that there were those who would have been glad to exchange her friendship for a stronger and, in their own estimation, more profitable, attachment. Of a love, however, that meant anything more than a close comradeship, she herself knew nothing, and had, moreover, little desire to learn. She had once heard it called disorganized friendship, and decided to remember the phrase. The possibility of breaking other people's hearts she did not take seriously. So she saw no necessity for foregoing the society of anyone to whom she was physically or mentally attracted.

A taint of animalism in her nature tended to heighten her physical attractiveness, but was almost always misinterpreted, for in her friends, as, indeed, in her reading, she looked for, and was prepared to take pleasure in, only so much of what the world calls animalism as made for appreciation of the joy of living. So much was this a vital force within her, that no social restrictions, not even the more serious considerations of sex, prevented her from attempting to taste the enjoyment of every healthy sport or pastime. Opposition at home or shocked surprise abroad only served to whet her appetite and to help her to enjoy the triumph of her boy-friends' admiration, which, to do them justice, they were usually at small pains to conceal. Latterly she had been in the habit of taking her mother to witness games of all sorts, and would on such occasions shout at her friends' successes with genuine excitement in a manner which her father, had he been present, would have regarded as indecorous. Afterwards she would discuss the game with such a nicety of detail as would have led any stranger to suppose she had herself been playing. In point of fact, she could play most games,

and well, too ; yet she was no mere Amazon, for it was curious to note that she never allowed herself to be carried altogether away from her art or from the more thoughtful aspects of human life, turning sometimes in conversation to intellectual subjects with as much keenness as if they were her only interests.

It must be confessed that from time to time Ruth had her reigning favourite. At present it was the Reverend John Barnett, a new curate in the parish, and he stood a very good chance of remaining in the ascendant, for Mr. Sheridan was delighted that his daughter should at last have become acquainted with a man of earnest spiritual life. That Barnett had been a 'Blue' was a sufficient recommendation to Ruth. He was, besides, nice-looking, and could when he chose become delightfully unclerical. Mr. Sheridan as churchwarden had been the first to extend to him an invitation to Tite Street. In his general acceptance by the family the clergyman constituted the only example of one of Mr. Sheridan's friends becoming thoroughly intimate with both mother and daughter.

This, then, was the household where, according to Tom Manning, Cedric would find a wholesome antidote to the melancholia from which he had avowedly been suffering.

All morning Tom had waxed eloquent upon the subject of the family. 'Old Sheridan,' he had said, 'is a bit cranky ; rather too fond of going to church for me ; but the mother is a brick. She's very young for a mother,' he had added, 'and thinks of nothing but her daughter. I've noticed that often. I think that's rather decent in a mother. Some mothers, you know, don't care much for their girls. An awful shame, of course, but you can't get over it. Blanche says Mrs.

Sheridan's an ideal mater to have. Oh, they're just the sort of people for you.'

'Well, don't get talking about my books, please,' Cedric had said. 'I believe I'm ashamed of having written them.'

'All right, old man,' had come the cheery reply, 'I won't say a word about them. I expect you won't be wanting to go back to Chipton for a while. Ruth's a devilishly ripping girl—fair-haired, and all that. I'm quite keen on you two meeting.'

The result of all this was that when they arrived at Tite Street, Cedric could not resist the idea that he was being 'trotted out.' At the moment of entering the Sheridans' drawing-room, however, he was conscious of so much expectant curiosity, so much amused interest in what he felt Tom would consider 'a situation,' that all contingent self-consciousness was entirely banished. Indeed, as he was shaking hands with Mrs. Sheridan, there flashed across him the knowledge that behind Tom's broad triumphal smile there lay the conviction that he, Tom, had accomplished a masterly act of diplomacy. To realize oneself as a social puppet in the hands of a Tom Manning in itself constituted a deliciously funny idea. It was additionally amusing to reflect that his own sagacity had, nevertheless, by no means saved him from at least one act of complete submission to the scheme of things—a direct, if unconscious, homage to Manning's will. For that night, reviewing, as was his wont, the events of the past day, he clearly remembered how, on following his friend into the room, he must have been seen to glance round the occupants of the strange house as if searching for a familiar object. The action was involuntary, but must, he thought, have appeared somewhat absurd.

The room was full of people, not talking in pairs, but in groups, and these were for ever breaking and making place for others.

'I've brought a friend, Mrs. Sheridan,' said Tom. 'Mr. Readham—you have often heard me speak of him.'

'Of course.' Mrs. Sheridan gave him her hand, smiling. 'You live at Sieveley, don't you?'

'Well, I was born there. My uncle lives there when he's in England.'

'Yes,' Mrs. Sheridan prattled on; 'he's always abroad, I know. I used to meet him at one time. That was when I and my father were in Rome—he painting a good deal, and I going out.'

'In '72?' Cedric queried.

'Well, about then; but don't ask me the year. And where is Lord Loughton now?' she went on.

Cedric described his uncle's regular autumnal migration from Switzerland to the Italian lakes.

'Switzerland?' Mrs. Sheridan brightened. 'Ah! I forgot he was a climber. And you—the Alpine Club, I suppose?'

'No; I've never been in the Alps.'

'What! and a climbing uncle, too! Ruth!' she called over her shoulder. 'I shall leave my daughter to admonish you.' She turned laughingly to Cedric.

Ruth found her way to where her mother was standing. Cedric looked hard at her as she came towards him, laughter on her bright face. As she passed across the room the men turned. She bore and replied to a fusillade of small chaff, reflections of former talks. Mrs. Sheridan presented Cedric, saying as she did so that her guest was the nephew of an old acquaintance of hers, and admitted without so much as an expres-

sion of regret that he had never been to Switzerland. 'My daughter's rhetoric, Mr. Readham, will probably drive you there,' she finished.

Ruth immediately began the assault, but had only discharged some of her lighter artillery when Manning joined them. Tom had been waiting for this moment. He found it impossible to stand apart at the instant when the hero and heroine of what was beginning in his mind to assume the proportions of a drama were, so to speak, brought together. He caught the drift of their conversation at once.

'Oh, I say,' he remarked; 'hang it all! Readham's an awfully good footer player—a man can't be everything, you know.' Tom looked infinitely sagacious. Cedric realized that this apposite observation clearly appeased the extremely good-looking Amazon with whom he was conversing.

'But, you know,' Tom went on, 'he's been slacking. I want him to play for Southdale.'

'I don't suppose I'm any good now.'

Ruth flouted the idea, and hazarded a guess that he played three-quarter.

'I used to at Cambridge,' Cedric admitted.

'Oh, well, of course,' Ruth turned to Manning, 'Mr. Readham will know Jack Barnett.'

Cedric, none too pleased, remembered him perfectly well. 'Let me see,' he added. 'Did he ever go into the Church? I seem to remember some talk of it.'

Tom repeated the question with an ironical laugh. Ruth laughed, too. 'Where's Jack?' she said. 'Fetch him, Tom.'

A tall, athletic-looking clergyman came towards them. Cedric wondered whether his face betrayed the flash of rather disagreeable reminiscence which crossed

his mind at the moment of their meeting. It was typical of the attitude of mind, which had come to be his, that the face of a man known in former years succeeded only in restoring to his vision intellectual surroundings, which had been common to them—their college life, he would have called it—but stripped of all those associations of place and time to most men so inseparable from social recollections. Barnett's face, then, brought with it no emotional return to the slumberous court where they had both lived, to the gentle sounds of the riverside, to the cries from the playing-fields, but it did bring back to him a host of little sayings, witty and foolish, a host of little doings, petty or important, trivial manners or customs, affectations unrealized at the time. He remembered with the clearness of yesterday his own unequal struggle between the manhood to which he aspired and the childhood he had so readily rejected. In looking at Barnett, unprejudiced as it seemed now that they were both men definitely started on life's journey, his own adherence and the other's antagonism to the later policy of the 'Openhearts' became in a moment intelligible.

The clergyman had been one to denounce everything connected with the 'Openhearts' as execrable, if not actually blasphemous—one of a set of muscular Christians, who would only associate on the field with such as Cedric, and even there with an air of superiority which, however sincere, had been very galling to all the 'Openhearts' save those who, in their self-imposed rôle of *poseur*, had rather courted attention and unpopularity.

Whatever Barnett and Cedric felt now, their greeting was conventional enough.

'How do you do, Readham?' said Barnett pleasantly. 'It must be four or five years since I saw you last.'

'I think it must,' said Cedric, shaking hands.

'The three of us were up together,' observed Tom, addressing Ruth, 'which is very pleasant to think of.'

Barnett turned politely to Cedric. 'What have you been doing with yourself all this time?' he said.

'I've been horribly slack, I'm afraid,' replied the other, glancing at Ruth, 'but Tom—oh, I suppose he's going to reform me.'

'Hence the Southdale proposition, I suppose?' the girl chimed in.

'Ruth would like to play footer herself,' announced Tom.

'Mr. Manning, you're making me out a mere tom-boy!' Ruth drew herself up in mock chagrin. 'Now, go away. I want to talk to Mr. Readham.' The clergyman moved past them towards Mrs. Sheridan. 'Oh dear, I didn't mean old Jack to go off,' the girl exclaimed. Then, turning to Cedric, 'You see, I can be very forward,' she laughed.

Cedric followed her through groups of people towards a settee. Miss Sheridan exchanged a few salutations on her way. 'How are your labours progressing?' she said to a tall, dark man with a bushy brown beard. 'Is it going to be very delightful?'

'Oh, much the same as usual, Miss Sheridan. The sad business is always the number of frauds, and the subsequent letters of complaint when they are sent back.'

'That,' announced Ruth, when they had taken their seat, 'is what my mother calls one of the most conscientious of our academicians. He doesn't pretend

to be an original painter ; he just does nice little things, careful studies of *genre*.'

'But, then, I don't understand . . .' Cedric began.

'Oh, but you can, Mr. Readham. Our Academy has to be a learned as well as an original body, and Mr. Morecombe knows more about Dutch painters than all the other academicians put together. Besides, he gives charming lectures to the students.'

'I hate lectures,' said Cedric.

'So the Universities still do something definite,' laughed Ruth. 'Did anyone ever leave Oxford or Cambridge without that opinion?—except, of course, students of my own sex! Oh! how did you get on with the Newnhamites, Mr. Readham?'

'I'm afraid I didn't know any, Miss Sheridan, and I'm beginning to feel I've missed . . .'

Ruth puckered. 'Oh, please, Mr. Readham, do remember I am just something of a tomboy, and needn't be complimented—at least,' she added, with a laugh, as she settled herself back on the cushions, 'not through the medium of my kind.'

Cedric was puzzled but interested. He stole a glance at her face, for the moment in sharp profile. She caught his stare ; her fine eyes, he thought, had the flash of enthusiasm.

'You're looking at the smoke,' she said. Cedric was not, but he now noticed thin blue wreaths ascending from amongst a group of people more towards the centre of the room. 'We all smoke,' she said boldly ; 'but those people don't know our simple rules. Our rule is no smoking till my father has been in and gone off to evening service. My dear father—please don't think me disrespectful—is of a type that ought to have disappeared, but hasn't.'

Cedric began to feel that if he were to get on with Miss Sheridan for the nonce he would have, in school-boy parlance, to play up. 'Well,' said he, 'I heard another match struck then; the infamy is becoming general. May I have a cigarette?'

'Please do.' Ruth handed him a case. 'Now we can really talk. May I have a light? You know,' she went on, 'Tom Manning is often talking about you. I ought, of course, to say that I feel I know all about you in consequence, but one doesn't, you know, with any one Tom talks about. Let's see, we were talking of Newnhamites, but you said you didn't know any. I'm wondering if you would have liked them if you had. You see what I mean—do you think it any good, that sort of thing?'

Cedric was puzzled how to take her, and he looked it. Ruth was quick to perceive. 'I know,' she said, leaning towards him, 'I've thrown you off your guard. You were on the point of putting me down as a woman's-rights sort of lady, and now . . .'

Cedric laughed heartily. She was so quick, so frank, so direct. This kind of talk was new to him. 'I should really like to know . . .' he said.

'Oh, I'm so glad'—she anticipated him again—'if you really mean that you'd like to know exactly what it is I do actually think; and that is just what I've been wanting you to tell me of yourself. Do you know what it is to be awfully keen about things, about ideas, and to be just fearfully inquisitive to know what everyone one meets thinks about them? To be interested in things first, you see, and people afterwards. I must chance you thinking me horribly *gauche*.'

Cedric let himself go. He reflected afterwards how from this moment the personal equation had been

banished from his mind. His companion became neglected *qua* woman ; he let his thoughts take shape in words just as they came in the rough. He did not know that this was the attitude Ruth had striven to set up in him, that it was exactly the attitude she herself was not assuming. She marked the warm flush come and go across his forehead, saw him lean forward on his knees looking straight before him, forgetful almost of his surroundings. For the thousandth time she asked herself, were the Greeks again at fault, or did this man's own individual handsomeness correspond with some mental excellence ?

'Isn't it extraordinary,' Cedric was saying, 'that we should have come to this point—I mean be so interested, after we have really been talking about nothing at all !'

'But we have constructed a little commentary upon conversation !'

He was recalled. He looked at her. 'Yes ; we agreed, didn't we, that people were less interesting than their thoughts ?'

'That's not my corollary,' said Ruth. 'I was speaking not so much of their thoughts as of the things they think about.'

'And suppose they should be people ?'

'The vicious circle ?' Ruth blushed. There was a small triumph in Cedric's eyes.

'I think we must talk about people,' said he.

The girl eyed him almost strangely. 'We will, some day,' she made answer. 'We must look at some now,' she went on. 'You see those two men coming into the room ? The little man with the twinkle is Arthur Lacey—you must have heard of him—and just behind—I won't describe him—is my dear father.'

They rose to their feet.

'Oh, really!' said Cedric. 'I should so much like to meet . . .'

'Which?'

'Both.'

'You can't fail to. A fatality usually arranges that Mr. Lacey either comes or goes at the moment my father puts in an appearance. He is so flippant, so all that he shouldn't be on a British Sabbath!' They had approached to within speaking distance of the young clergyman. 'Do foregather with an old college friend, Mr. Readham,' she said mischievously. 'My father will delight in you the moment he sees you so properly engaged. Father!' she called. 'Mr. Readham wishes to be introduced to you.'

Mr. Sheridan approached smiling. The clergyman turned towards them. Ruth's glance embraced them all.

'Mr. Readham,' said she, 'is an old friend of Tom Manning's, and of Jack's,' she added slyly, and left them.

Cedric found himself back in a conventional world. He was nodding and smiling at appropriate moments, the while his eye was for Lacey and his ear for that gentleman's loud-voiced salutations. Mr. Lacey was a small, stout man, whose reddish face and well-cut clothes betokened prosperity, and his easy smile contentment. He was in his element when in the midst of a group of people. He usually talked quickly, and there was always just a dash of gag in his conversation. His entrances into a room sometimes seemed almost studied, his exits demanded a curtain.

'My dear Mrs. Sheridan,' he was saying, 'here I am again in distinguished company. I come to you from my poor group of players to be refreshed, and at the

same time to be humbled. I spy an academician, and not—do I?—yes, surely—my dear friend, the Baron d'Horloge. He always strikes one. You are used to my harmless puns. May I have some tea? Will Ruth be allowed to talk to me this afternoon? Ah! Mr. Sheridan, how do you do? That you, Barnett? How are your schools, bazaars, and boys' clubs going on? I always promise to watch you play football, but I can't, unless Ruth takes me there. I don't understand the game—at least, I've forgotten it, of course.'

Ruth stole up behind him. 'Come away, Mr. Lacey,' she said sternly. 'You are at your old tricks, interrupting an earnest conversation.'

'No, no,' said Mr. Lacey, 'I give it a slight spin in the opposite direction. The reaction is so violent; but they bless me in the end.'

'You will be doing a kindness, then,' exclaimed Ruth, 'if you will give a prolonged spin, as you call it, to the conversation of your friend the Baron. Lady Mary is sinking under the load.'

'Certainly, certainly; but may I not have some tea? I could never do anything with the Baron on an empty stomach. A cup of tea—perhaps two cups—a little sally-hunn, and then—have at him!'

Mr. Lacey adopted a winsome attitude, and was gone.

Cedric heard Mr. Sheridan's tirade against board-schools to an end. The air was becoming too clouded with tobacco smoke for the master of the house to be in it any longer. He consulted his watch. He glanced apologetically at Cedric. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but our service . . . what do you make the time, Barnett?'

'Yes, I think, perhaps . . . ' said the clergyman. He looked at his hostess. Mrs. Sheridan was at his elbow.

'Is it time, Jack?' she queried in polite distress.

‘Good-bye. We shall be on the ground on Saturday. Ruth is persistent. Do I hear you are likely to be playing, Mr. Readham?’

‘I think not.’

Barnett turned to him. ‘We shall see a little more of you, I hope,’ said he, smiling.

Mr. Sheridan coughed impatience. Barnett took his leave.

‘Shall we go together, sir?’

Mr. Sheridan assented.

Cedric watched the clergyman pass by the groups of talkers and glance once back. He just raised his eyebrows, gave the slightest bow, a flush of pleasure stole over his face, and he was gone. Cedric turning deferentially to Mrs. Sheridan caught sight, at the far end of the room, of Ruth’s face, saw the gleam in her eye leave the doorway and return shadowed somewhat to the faces of her immediate companions.

‘Where Tom Manning is,’ Mrs. Sheridan was saying, ‘I don’t know. Tell me, Mr. Readham—you are staying with them—why didn’t you bring Blanche? or is it one of her hospital days?’

‘I think it is,’ said Cedric. They paused. ‘Mr. Lacey amuses me,’ he said at last. ‘One sees notices of his plays everywhere. Should I see them? I foresee myself frivolling a bit in the future.’

‘Oh, he’s clever,’ replied Mrs. Sheridan, folding her hands, her eyes wandering amongst her guests, ‘but quite spoilt. Had he been born on the other side of the Channel, he would have carried his nonsense with *un air*; in England we can’t talk nonsense: our language is too Teutonic. We must either be profound or dull. Yet not every Frenchman sees that.’

‘But, surely, they are for ever saying so.’

'Well, take Baron d'Horloge as an example. One meets him everywhere. He is rarely in a circle where French would not be understood, yet he persists in translating his *badinage* into ungrammatical, ponderous English !'

'And reviles us as dullards, I suppose, because we don't laugh ?'

'Come,' she added, 'do you know Mr. Lonsdale, or shall I present you ? He was much in Cambridge in your time, I think.'

Cedric did not know him, but the name was familiar. Mrs. Sheridan led him to where Mr. Lonsdale, with his head resting upon a rectangular arrangement of his two arms, was talking to a shabbily-dressed man, whose hair hung limply on his shoulders.

'But I simply can't read him,' he was saying as they approached.

'Mr. Lonsdale,' Mrs. Sheridan interrupted, 'I want to make Mr. Readham known to you. Mr. Readham is of a family of Cambridge men.' Then, turning to the other man, 'Professor Hernrodt,' she said, 'you will remember Lord Loughton in Vienna.'

'Bod yes,' said that gentleman. 'Und you are a relateef ? Not your farder ? He was an old man in '73.'

'No ; my grandfather.'

'There was a Readham of my year,' remarked Mr. Lonsdale, when Mrs. Sheridan had left them. 'He was only up one year.'

'That would be my uncle George,' said Cedric.

Then followed a host of questions as to men of Cedric's time—fellows of the college, teachers of the University, migratory lights from elsewhere, all of which left Cedric with a sense of having missed a great

deal during his residence. He thanked the Austrian for the relief which he effected by his warm denunciation of the methods of English scholarship. For one man only of Cedric's time did Professor Hernrodt express unqualified admiration ; but then, Lord Howland was in a manner Teuton.

'Yes ; I went to his lectures,' Cedric admitted.

'Und you shbeak to 'im many times ?'

'No ; he was something of a recluse.' Cedric was losing his feeling of contentment. He talked on a while, but he could not help glancing round the room for more congenial society. People were thinning out now. Ruth was talking to Manning, with whom she was evidently on the best of terms. They both looked momentarily in his direction, noted his glance, and came towards him. He bowed himself away from Mr. Lonsdale and the professor.

'Cedric, we shall have to be going,' announced Tom.

'Going, going ?' a voice chimed in behind them.

Tom looked over his shoulder. 'That you, Lacey ?'

'My dear fellow,' said the other in an undertone, 'who's your friend ? Introduce me. Something of the discobolus, eh ?' Manning effected an introduction.

'Did I hear you threaten to depart ?' Lacey demanded in tragic tones. 'It is most disappointing—just, too, when I contemplated making a sensation with my villain.'

'With your what ?' asked Manning.

'Oh dear !' Ruth struck in. 'How absurd you are ! It's poor Lord Sothernmere, I suppose. I won't have you calling him a villain.'

Cedric suppressed a start. For a moment those by him faded out of sight, and he saw the man with the bristly moustache dining at Ostend. He looked

curiously first at Lacey, then at Ruth Sheridan, but he said nothing.

‘You’re standing in his light, then,’ Lacey exclaimed warningly. ‘His only chance of success lies in systematic villainy.’

‘Well, he won’t come now, it’s too late,’ said Ruth.

Tom Manning showed no anxiety to await Mr. Lacey’s sensation. ‘We’re dining out,’ he explained.

Ruth accompanied them across the room.

Cedric wanted to speak to her, but on a sudden experienced a sense of shyness. He felt glad that he was on the point of departure. Mention of Sothernmere’s name seemed, somehow, to have altered things. So Ruth Sheridan knew him.

He said good-bye to her hurriedly.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH NOTHING DEFINITE HAPPENS

It was with the greatest difficulty that Tom Manning restrained himself from putting a question concerning Cedric's impressions of the Sheridans in general and Ruth in particular, until the hansom that was carrying them to Sloane Street had been on its way for some ten minutes. That he desired to wait any length of time followed on the idea that Cedric should be allowed some few moments in which duly to reflect upon the subject. Cedric himself was gazing pensively out of the cab, seemingly indifferent to Tom's presence, and the latter began to feel hugely excited. Cedric, he thought, was evidently moved to a great admiration for Ruth. He had seen them on the settee together, and had without hesitation drawn conclusions of the most pleasant, if wholly unreasonable, character. He was inclined now more than ever to pride himself on a surprising sagacity, an almost infallible instinct which enabled him to bring together just those two people who could have most desire to know each other. He chuckled inwardly as he thought of the story he would be able to pour into Blanche's ears that night. The whole idea of taking Cedric to the Sheridans, he told himself, had been a most happy one. Words were on the tip of his tongue, but Cedric still gazed out at the horse's ears, and it was

a positive pleasure to contemplate a man apparently so engrossed in his own thoughts. True, there was no smile on his face, but from that omission Tom deduced nothing more than a natural wish on the part of his friend not to show the extent to which he had been fascinated.

At last he could wait no longer. 'Well?' said he.

'Er . . . charming people.' Cedric uttered the words without thinking.

'Ah!' said Tom, feeling wily. 'I think you enjoyed yourself.'

Cedric gave a little movement of the head as he replied in the affirmative. He had alternately been thinking of the scene at Ostend, and wondering why he could not efface the matter from his mind, why the mention of Lord Sothernmere's name had affected him at all, and why he had been annoyed to learn that Miss Sheridan was acquainted with him. That he had been so annoyed there was no doubt.

'Of course,' continued Tom, 'it was impossible to see much of the Sheridans themselves with such a crowd there; still, you . . .'

'A crowd of very interesting people,' interrupted Cedric.

'I forgot to tell you about Barnett. Of course, he still plays footer.'

Cedric had forgotten the clergyman. 'Yes,' he said. 'Well, I don't think he has changed very much in these five years. I rather imagine he is one of those men who don't change after their second year at Trinity. A lot don't, you know,' he added. 'I mean to say, they don't go through fundamental alterations in character. They seem merely to be advancing along the same line.'

'Of course,' agreed Tom affably. He did not under-

stand Cedric's meaning, but he was in a mood to agree with anything that might be said. 'And Ruth—did you get on well with her?' He felt that this was one of those totally superfluous questions asked only when one wants to hear one's thoughts put into words.

'She is . . . curious,' replied Cedric, and he spoke earnestly. 'She excites one's interest. We had quite a long talk together.'

'Did you?' Tom spoke roguishly. Why could not have Blanche come with them to Chelsea instead of running the most dreadful risks inside an East London hospital? 'Did you, indeed?' He was sorely tempted to put questions of a more private nature, but resolved to let things take their own course for a little time. He began to discuss Mr. Sheridan and Barnett, and handed on as his own the various opinions about them, which from time to time he had heard expressed. Then he veered round to the subject of Blanche, carefully leading up to a question upon the advisability of exercising his own authority in stopping Mrs. Manning from paying her fortnightly visits to the hospital.

Cedric became easier in mind. He suggested that as Mrs. Manning was going away to her sister's in a few days, nothing should be said until her return. After that, of course, Tom would have to do what he thought best.

'And you understand, old man,' said Tom, 'that I expect you to stay with me while she is away.'

Cedric smiled. 'That is a large order for you, Tom,' he replied.

'Ho, ho!' roared Tom, thinking of the Sheridans. 'I don't suppose I shall be worried by you too much. You will find plenty to do.'

The hansom entered Sloane Street. To his disgust,

Tom found that Mrs. Manning had not yet returned. Once again he sought Cedric's advice about the hospital matter, and although he received nothing more than a reply which might have been counselling any plan under the sun, he mentally resolved to take full advantage of Cedric's stay at his house during his wife's absence, and obtain information as to the best means to adopt in case of any such unfortunate incident as had disturbed his peace of mind during the past week.

The two men had settled themselves in Tom's study. Pipes had been lighted, the fire brought to a cheerful blaze, curtains drawn across the windows. For some time there had been silence. Then suddenly Cedric spoke.

'Tom, do you know that man Lord Sothernmere?'

Tom nodded. 'Ass,' he said laconically.

'Met him at the Sheridans, I suppose?'

'No; I went to see Lacey one day, and met him there. Oh, I have seen him at Chelsea, but I don't think he goes often.' A light broke across his countenance. Was it possible, he wondered, that Cedric had already scented a possible rival in that fool Sothernmere? The idea tickled him. He was firmly convinced now that Cedric had succumbed at first sight to Ruth's charms. There was a cheerful prospect of some very delicate 'ragging.' 'Of course, Ruth has a good many friends,' he observed.

Cedric stared. 'Well, I didn't suppose she had not. I wasn't speaking of her. I was asking you if you knew Sothernmere.'

'Not as well as I know Barnett,' replied Tom, suppressing a choke—'not half so well. Of course, I see *him* every time I go to Chelsea.'

Cedric did not trouble to see the point of this last

remark, and in a few moments Mrs. Manning put in an appearance.

During the course of the next few days it became evident to Cedric that his benevolent friend Tom was very much the victim of the fixed idea.

Now it is commonly supposed that matchmaking is an exclusively feminine pastime. In the fact that there are few families which do not contain some elderly lady whose life is more or less devoted to this amiable pursuit lies the reason for this highly erroneous notion. As a matter of fact, whilst it may be admitted that womankind has raised matchmaking to the level of a fine art, the desire to 'throw people together' is by no means absent from the masculine disposition, and if the craft and subtlety employed by man for this benevolent purpose appears somewhat rougher and more primitive than that adopted by woman, the result is often surprisingly good. Yet it may be doubted whether the consciousness of being one of those thrown together for the purpose of delighting one's friends at the altar of Hymen is an altogether pleasant sensation : and herein lies the difference between masculine and feminine tactics, that, whereas women rarely fail to conceal from their victims the knowledge that they are at all forming part of a beneficent set-piece, men almost invariably succeed in unwillingly disclosing this unhappy intelligence.

No one could have been more conscious of somewhat reluctantly taking part in an elemental nuptial drama than was Cedric during the days immediately succeeding his introduction to the Sheridans. It was, perhaps, well for him that he still considered himself something of a philosopher, for he was thereby enabled to perceive

in his subservience to Tom's kindly design so much of the ludicrous as to outweigh by far any trifling inconvenience, if such it might be called, which his supposed attitude as Ruth's suitor thus early in their acquaintance might otherwise have in store for him. He submitted with a good grace and a smiling countenance to Tom's festive arrangements, involving, as all of them did, a very constant intercourse between himself and Ruth Sheridan. It was his view, firstly, that to become on intimate terms with one of a household where sooner or later he was sure to meet intellectual and artistic people was in itself valuable and delightful; and, secondly, that the companionship of a superbly pretty and vivacious girl was, after all, by no means to be despised. Beyond that at present he thought of nothing. He was fortified, however, with the notion that Ruth was a distinctly strong-minded person. This characteristic, coupled with his own calm, reflective disposition, constituted, he felt sure, a sufficient armament against the shafts of any Cupid instigated by his friend Manning.

Tom had made a particular point of Cedric's playing in a certain match, but his idea had been largely dispelled by the persistent manner in which he had arranged a series of *rencontres* between the two objects of his solicitude. In short, it was quite impossible to induce Cedric to embark upon a serious system of athletics, if he were continually to be called upon to pay polite attentions to Ruth. It was equally absurd to expect a rapid and violent romance, such as he desired, to inflame the heart of Cedric Readham if he were constantly and urgently requested to devote himself to football. A fusion of these two attractions was inevitable. In the language of mathematics the re-

sultant of these two forces would proceed along a middle course, which astute reasoning may be exemplified by saying that Cedric, instead of playing in Saturday's match, agreed to become a spectator of another game as a convoy to Mrs. Sheridan and her daughter.

It need hardly be said that Tom, as soon as he learnt Cedric's decision to watch the match with the Sheridans, was profoundly of the opinion that a sure and certain sign had thereby been given of a fast-maturing passion for the adorable Ruth. In this supposition he took no little pleasure, and his letters to his wife savoured from this moment of rather more self-congratulation than the actual course of events altogether warranted. For, as a matter of fact, Cedric may honestly be said to have never attended a football match with a lesser sense of romantic surroundings than on the day upon which he first consented to accompany the Sheridans to see Southdale contest the supremacy of the Southern Rovers in the United English League.

The day was foggy, dank, and, even for a London suburb, particularly dreary. The ground was packed with eager, squalid spectators. The atmosphere smelt terribly of rags and orange-peel ; the air was rent with the hoarse cries and nondescript murmurs of the hundreds who were prepared to waste time and money in viewing a contest they but indifferently understood, yet in the result of which their savings or wages were not a little concerned.

Cedric and the ladies under his charge were mounting the steps of the pavilion some five minutes before the kick-off. The countenances of each betokened very different sensations. Mrs. Sheridan looked bored, a little tired, but courageous. Ruth, her bright eyes busy

among the people as they pushed through, was evidently enjoying the crowd and the expectation of a good game. It was plain she minded little if the wet mist hung like dew over the hair about her ears. Cedric, in his big overcoat and hat well down over his eyes, wore an air of good-tempered amusement. From the moment they had stepped into the cab that afternoon he could not resist the idea that he was behaving in a more irrational manner than he had ever done before. Once they were packed into a Metropolitan railway-carriage, but one compartment of a train full of sightseers, a sense of absurdity stole swiftly upon him. Why on earth was he going to see football? Fond as he was of the game, he cared not two straws for either Southdale or the Southern Rovers. It would be very cold, very foggy, consequently very difficult to watch. Were it not for the fact that Tom was playing, he would really have been unable to account to himself for his readiness to undergo so much discomfort. And, after all, he had seen dear old Manning miss passes before now. He had always thought that Manning was hardly reliable on a sticky day. He was amused, too, at finding himself a squire of dames after all his cynicism, all his discovered irony in men and things. Of course, Ruth Sheridan was an excellent companion, but there is not much companionship obtainable in an overcrowded railway-carriage. Talking was almost impossible, so he and Ruth, who sat opposite him, passed the time in glancing at the hands of a party of whist-players in the middle of the carriage, trying to be amused at the progress of the game, but in the momentary glances which they stole at one another it was fairly obvious that their thoughts were elsewhere. Before the train had brought them to their destination

Cedric had begun to enjoy an unanalyzable sense of contentment. This short journey, the conditions of which practically disposed of ordinary conversation, had given him the first opportunity he had yet had for reflecting upon Ruth in that lady's presence. Apparently, too, he himself upon this occasion was the subject of a like scrutiny and consideration. In common with most other human beings so occupied, they had endeavoured by glancing through the opposite windows, with an air of supreme indifference, to disabuse each other of any such notion. But there came the inevitable moment when the roving eye of each met in an all too intelligent glance. A gleam of detection flashed from the faces of both, and the slight blush of self-consciousness on Cedric's face had, he felt sure, not passed unnoticed. It was annoying, but very amusing. His smile very nearly became a laugh when he perceived dimples of amusement appear at the corners of Ruth's mouth, a circumstance for which the parlous condition of her neighbour's hand could not be held altogether accountable.

By the time they reached the ground, therefore, in spite of even dirtier weather than they had expected, Mrs. Sheridan was the only one of the three who apparently was not in the best of spirits. Cedric sat himself down between mother and daughter, and produced field-glasses. The teams were issuing manfully into the fog. Loud and confused murmurings went as a wave round the ground. The police became active in suppressing stragglers.

'We must look out for Tom, mustn't we?' said Mrs. Sheridan, with the bravest attempt at excitement.

'There's not much mistaking him,' said Cedric good-humouredly.

'And Jack—I think I can see Jack,' said Ruth, standing up and picking the glasses from Cedric's knees without a word.

'Who?' asked the latter, looking up.

'Mr. Barnett. He always plays, you know,' replied Mrs. Sheridan.

Ruth still examined the field through the glasses. 'I hope he's in good form,' she said, as she sat down.

'I haven't seen him play for years,' remarked Cedric. 'Tom, by the way, was always a bit clumsy on a day like this.'

'Yes,' said Ruth. 'May I have your glasses again, Mr. Readham? Thanks awfully. Oh, there's Jack. Look, mummy! D'you see? He's on the right wing. He's one of the few men I know who always looks neat even when he is muddy.'

Cedric wished there was more room for his feet. He was beginning to feel bored. 'I'm afraid we shan't see very well,' he said, buttoning his coat-collar. 'I hope you don't feel cold, Mrs. Sheridan.'

'Oh, please don't think of me,' replied that lady. 'I'm really quite interested, you know, and Ruth explains things as the game goes on; but I shall ask you all my silly questions now.'

'Hullo! They've kicked off,' cried Ruth. 'Don't you wish you were playing, Mr. Readham?'

Cedric relapsed into conventional gallantry. 'I'm very happy where I am, thank you, Miss Sheridan,' said he.

'Now I can't say what I was going to,' said Ruth, with the glasses to her face.

'You mean you'd like to be playing, too, I suppose?' said Cedric.

‘She would really,’ laughed Mrs. Sheridan. ‘Her father thinks it’s so shocking,’ she added gravely.

Cedric thought he had never seen a duller game of football. The ball was in touch every other yard on the far side of the field, where the mist hung so thickly that only by a series of whistles could they tell that the halves were failing to get the ball out straight. The ground was desperately sticky. Then on a sudden Cedric saw smart play in the centre, and he grew excited in spite of himself. The spectacle of Tom’s burly figure half-way down the line-out, a tuft of black hair sticking through the top of his ear-cap, recalled other scenes. For the next few minutes Cedric’s interest was lost in a host of recollections. Above the shouts of the crowd and the whistle of the referee he thought he heard distant cries as from other grounds—the caw of rooks along a line of elms, the measured stroke of well-known chimes. A sudden grip on his arm was for the moment that of an old college chum ; then he realized it was a touch from the excited girl. He was back in London, making, perhaps, something of a fool of himself.

‘Ah ! what’s up now ?’ he said, and turned back his attention to the game. He noticed that the Reverend-John Barnett was showing the best of form. When the whistle sounded for half-time, Cedric braced himself to listen to a loud and long panegyric upon him ; and in the conversation which ensued he certainly had ample occasion for observing the interest which this sporting cleric had engendered in the breast of Ruth Sheridan : Jack had played awfully well ; if Southdale were to win, it would be due to his efforts, and so on, and so on.

Cedric refused to see in the display of enthusiasm anything but the inherent admiration for smooth-

faced curates which so often seemed part of girl-nature. In one of Ruth's ability, however, it was, he felt, really a most serious blemish, calculated to spoil the pleasure of the afternoon.

During the second half the atmosphere became perceptibly colder, as Mrs. Sheridan was constrained to admit. The clergyman still played well, but in the end Southdale, for which both he and Tom were playing, was beaten. Cedric on the way back comforted himself with the idea that in the Southdale defeat Jack's praises would, for some time at any rate, lie securely buried. Far from it. The moment they got into the train Ruth began to extol him as one of the best tennis players she had ever met. Cedric was goaded into expressing surprise that a London curate was able to find so much time for playing games.

'I know,' replied Ruth. 'He oughtn't to be a parson at all; he's much too nice.'

The remark being in a measure unanswerable, Cedric was forced to lean over to Mrs. Sheridan and ask leave to be a little late for dinner, as he would have some way to go and come before then.

'I am so glad that you are able to come to us to-night,' said Mrs. Sheridan in reply. 'I hope our party will interest you.'

'Would you like to know whom you're going to meet?' chimed in Ruth.

'Yes, very much,' said Cedric.

'Well,' replied the girl, 'there's my friend Jessie Galston, whom you will take in to dinner.'

'A clever painter,' interposed Mrs. Sheridan, 'but what my poor father would have called too fanciful.'

'Well, I hope Mr. Readham likes fanciful people. They are useful to novelists, anyhow, and I shouldn't

be a bit surprised if Mr. Readham was a novelist in disguise.'

Cedric looked, and certainly felt, uncomfortable. 'I wonder why you say that.'

'You often look as if you were studying us all.'

'Oh, well, am I to study Miss Galston?'

'Certainly; and there will be plenty of others when you are tired.'

'I think,' said Mrs. Sheridan, 'that you will like to meet Mr. Bentham. He was an Oxford man, I think.'

'Yes—Balliol,' assented Ruth; 'and such a little prig.'

'I hope I'm not too close to him,' said Cedric, laughing.

'Someone has to be between you, and you'll certainly have a distraction in a Miss Bonsor, who will sit opposite you. You mustn't mind her. Men don't usually take to her at first. She has red hair, cut short like a boy's.'

Cedric apologized for wanting to laugh.

'If she had any sense of humour she would laugh herself at it,' said Ruth. 'But to continue: you must know that mother is awfully pleased about to-night because she has got Winnington Orley to meet Professor Armitage.'

'Yes; they have never met,' said Mrs. Sheridan. 'Dr. Orley will not go into society. As people say, everyone reads his books, and no one ever sees him. He was a very intimate friend of my father's. I suppose I've known him for twenty years.'

'Yes,' laughed Ruth, 'and you've taken him all to yourself to-night of all nights, and put him as far away from Professor Armitage as you decently could.'

'Precisely,' retorted her mother; 'and I should like

to know what would happen if I placed them within speaking distance of one another ! They'll talk quite enough as it is, after dinner.'

'I shall be very interested to meet Winnington Orley,' said Cedric ; 'but I wish I could say that I knew his work. I once made an effort to read an essay of his. I could make nothing of it, though that was some time ago.'

Even when relieved of the necessity of seeing the Sheridans home, Cedric had none too much time to dress for dinner. As he hurriedly changed his clothes, he found his mind crowded with thoughts. Something had occurred that afternoon, he mused—no definite incident, indeed, no one train of thought, in which he had then for the first time found himself involved ; rather, perhaps, a suggestion that new gates were being opened for him, showing new paths and a new life that might be different from the aimless pessimistic existence that had been his, a life of hope and of joys. He was looking forward to the Sheridans' party like a child to some simple treat. He had gone about so little lately that to be asked to a dinner-party, on the face of it meaning much more than a social gathering of mere acquaintances, excited in him an almost equal amount of curiosity and interest.

As his cab drove through Kensington he found himself thinking more of the immediate past than of the immediate future. Ruth was certainly an intelligent girl. He speculated on the possibility of her having known something of his writings. Could it have been a mere shot, that remark of hers this afternoon, or was it not even so much as that—a mere phrase, a description ? Curiously enough, he felt so little confidence in the premature merit of his books that he would gladly

allow them to remain undiscovered by the Sheridans. To-night he would be part of a literary circle, yet he did not feel himself quite in the condition of a man of letters, on his way merely to meet other scholars. He felt, rather, that even if he were dining in another house to meet these particular men and women, he would be glad to meet them as Cedric Readham rather than as Mark Denman—somehow, that would be fair neither to himself nor to them. They were of another world—of a world that knew nothing of ‘Denmanism,’ of a world whose existence, perhaps, had been suggested to him only that afternoon. Nevertheless, in spite of an equal desire to remain incognito to host and guests alike, he was conscious that there were slightly different sentiments prompting his reticence in the two cases.

CHAPTER VII

WHICH HINTS AT SOMETHING MORE DEFINITE

IT was impossible to pass from the drawing-room of 138 Tite Street to the dining-room without experiencing something in the nature of a shock, even when the dining-room was obviously doing its best to look festive. Ruth had prepared Cedric for some such plunge by warning him to admire the remains of her father's Early Victorian homestead. Other than the magnificent walnut suite already alluded to, Mr. Sheridan's proudest possessions were crowded upon his dinner-table. Here were the choicest specimens of cut-glass—A.D. 1842—and four unwieldy canoes bearing across a waste of table-cloth neither spices nor myrrh, but only the condiments of a well-appointed table. These heroic reminders of our maritime power lay at anchor, naturally enough, at the corners of the table, whilst along the longer sides of the board the appetite for salt was appeased by the stationing of delicate cellars of that commodity, fashioned in the likeness of coal-scuttles. Yet these dexterous effigies were as nothing in comparison with the centre-piece, which must be reckoned amongst the very best extant specimens of its style and period. Its utility was indisputable. In form it was a patient dromedary, perched with almost feline agility upon a small rockery, and bearing upon its hump the choicest fruits of the

earth—that is to say, some four pounds of blue and green grapes, with their appropriate leaves. Poor Mrs. Sheridan and her less considerate daughter had for years fortified their æsthetic objections to this long-suffering animal by recalling to its owner the extraordinary difficulty and labour involved in keeping it even approximately bright and cheerful in appearance, objections which were strengthened by the fact that the real and movable bridle, with its appendant tassels, was for ever coming off in the hands of the servants. A crisis, indeed, had occurred in its career when, on the total destruction of this means of guiding it, it had, much against the parlourmaid's advice, been refitted and secured early upon a certain Saturday morning, but had in its reckless fashion fallen from the highest estate of the pantry-shelf with a singularly loud crash towards four in the afternoon, breaking the last surviving cups of an 1860 breakfast-service, and maiming a dog. Mrs. Sheridan, supported by her daughter, had had a long and earnest conversation with her husband on this subject, as a result of which Mr. Sheridan announced his intention of permitting those of his servants who had already given notice to quit, to go that day, whilst to those who would stay he would observe that the dromedary should be mended and repaired as often as broken, the money so expended being deducted from their wages. He had consented, however, by way of amicable settlement, to the definite housing of the dromedary in an upstairs cupboard, there to repose in tissue-paper and green baize until circumstances should arise necessitating its return to duty in order to lend lustre to the occasion.

The Sheridans did not often give dinner-parties, although they frequently extended the hospitality of

their table to friends and acquaintances. As they lived very much in a set, it usually meant that dinner at Tite Street was at all times a pleasant affair. But when that somewhat bearish person, Dr. Winnington Orley, Ruth's godfather, had actually consented not only to meet Henry Armitage at their house, but had so far stepped outside his ordinary boundaries of habit as to express a willingness to don the evening dress he detested, and make a little dinner the occasion of their meeting, Mrs. Sheridan had resolved upon enlarging the plan of entertainment so as to include, amongst others, their new friend Cedric Readham, whose praises as a thoughtful, if ill-advised, genius Tom Manning had been constantly singing.

Cedric arrived in Tite Street to find most of the party assembled.

'I'm so sorry, Mrs. Sheridan,' said he ; 'but I warned you, I think.' He shook hands with Ruth, and recognised Lacey. Mr. Sheridan came in a moment later. There were general greetings. Cedric was introduced to Miss Galston, a thin, somewhat gaunt girl with brown hair, wearing a green, full-sleeved dress, and ornaments of dull silver and enamel. She seemed very self-possessed, and started talking to him at once. Cedric was trying to get a look at the people around him, when Ruth and Lacey just behind her came over towards them.

'Well,' said the latter, 'what about your football to-day? The enemy seems to have left you un-maimed.'

'Oh, I wasn't playing.'

'Jack Barnett was,' interposed Ruth.

'Ah!' he's good, isn't he?'

'Very.'

'And,' struck in Cedric, 'he enjoys, according to Miss Sheridan, the advantage of always looking neat, even when muddy.'

'And well-dressed even in nothing at all,' Lacey finished the description.

Miss Galston laughed.

'What's that you're saying?' Mrs. Sheridan turned to them.

'Oh, he's only trying to pass the *mauvais quart d'heure*,' Ruth answered for him.

Dr. Winnington Orley was announced. A huge man, with something of a stoop, he slouched into the room, a questioning frown on his face as he searched for his hostess among the figures at the fireside. Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan greeted him warmly. He was at once presented to Professor Armitage, who rose from his chair with an eager look on his thin face, and, turning, talked closely to him, his arms akimbo. Over this man's shoulder Cedric was able to get a fair idea of the other's face and expression. He was the type of man whose long and straggling beard seemed applied to his face rather than to be growing from it. His eyes were dark and, Cedric thought, restless. His head was an undeniably fine one, the features, as he talked, sufficiently interesting to demand a clean-shaven face to give full expression to them. Cedric longed to hear the man talk. It was not very cheering to him, therefore, to note, as he followed Mr. Sheridan into the dining-room, that he had been placed on that gentleman's left, with Miss Galston for company, and Miss Bonsor as his *vis-à-vis*. He consoled himself with the reflection that in sitting opposite to this remarkable spinster he was favoured with an opportunity which would have been considered a golden one by the late

John Leech. In truth, poor Miss Bonsor looked very much like a plucked fowl. Her head was only partly covered with short, reddish-grey hair ; her neck looked as if it had suffered at the hands of some unskilful hangman, the massive jet necklace which she wore only serving to lend colour to this view. Next her sat Professor Armitage, a man narrow in body, intelligent and almost handsome in face, his iron-grey hair accurately brushed and parted, his features refined, his eyes thoughtful. To pass him in the street one would mark him as the cultured man of the world—perhaps a lawyer. Cedric felt a hope that he would later be able to engage him in conversation. He turned half-heartedly to Miss Galston.

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘I have been so much buried in the country lately that a London dinner-party seems to me quite a strange thing.’

She looked at him for a moment. ‘Oh, I think you will be very much amused. We shall have some fun presently.’

‘Fun ?’ said Cedric questioningly.

‘Yes, Mr. Lacey between Dr. Orley and the professor,’ replied Miss Galston. ‘He will play his favourite rôle of a sort of intellectual Puck. He always does when he gets the chance.’

Cedric laughed. ‘What do you mean by a sort of intellectual Puck ?’

‘Why, he will flit in and out of the conversation. My mother says he is a man who is ever regretting his lack of wings.’

Ruth turned for a moment to Cedric. ‘Here we are back in the midst of last century,’ she announced. ‘Look at our dromedary ! You mustn’t laugh at him. He has been with us a great number of years,

and is quite one of the family. Some day I will tell you his history, but don't let Jessie say anything.'

'That's her usual selfishness,' remarked Miss Galston. 'It's just the same at school—we go to the same art school, you know. Just now we are at work on the same things, and every day I see proofs of her perfectly shocking selfishness. She always wants the best positions and the longest time with the master, who is a frump, by the way, in spite of his being the best authority on the Early Flemish School.'

'The Flemish School?'

'Yes; he's written a book on Quentin Massys, who was a blacksmith or something before he turned painter, and he's constantly quoting from that.'

'Does he try to impress you with a sense of Brabant superiority?'

'He'd like to,' said Miss Galston; 'but he has some difficulty in doing that with a class of which all, with one or two exceptions, wish in their secret hearts to emulate the French impressionists.'

'Of course, you and Miss Sheridan are the exceptions?' said Cedric.

Ruth caught the remark, but was debarred from putting in a word, for Mr. Bentham had by that time entered upon a somewhat highly-coloured description of an Oxford chapel. He spoke glibly of the sensuous effects of religion.

'I can only speak for myself,' Miss Galston went on. 'I'm no smudger, I hope.'

The shrill voice of Lacey's partner—a Mrs. Blagden, well-known in geographical circles—could be distinctly heard from her end of the table. She was in reality delivering part of one of her celebrated lectures upon Abyssinia. She talked to Lacey, but at the company.

'I should say the Abyssinians were a particularly interesting race,' ventured the playwright.

'Oh, I'm so glad you think so,' Mrs. Blagden turned brightly upon him. 'Have you travelled much in their country?'

'Not very much,' Lacey conceded. He had not been within two thousand miles of the country. 'But,' he added diplomatically, 'it is one of my ambitions to go through every inch of it.'

'You would never regret it,' observed Mrs. Blagden, 'never.'

'Are there any dromedaries there?' asked Ruth across the table, innocence writ large on her face.

'Surely, we all have our dromedaries, Miss Sheridan,' suggested Lacey oracularly.

'Whatever do you mean, Mr. Lacey?' queried his partner.

'I mean,' said Lacey guardedly, 'the dromedary ought to be extinct, but isn't, as we see.'

'Oh, a most valuable beast of burden in the desert,' Mrs. Blagden proceeded, warming to her subject.

'Ah! but that's because motor-cars have not yet come into general use in Abyssinia,' said Lacey. 'I speak of them as a type of surviving tradition.' Dr. Orley's gaze forced him to notice another and not too sympathetic listener. Realizing that his conversational powers were best displayed in interjections rather than in sustained speech, he resigned himself to listening to as much of Mrs. Blagden's lecture as that lady had prepared for him.

Cedric's attention was constantly diverted at his end of the table to Miss Bonsor, who was talking in a very animated manner to Professor Armitage. 'It was perfectly heavenly,' he could hear her saying. 'The sun-

sets were almost too wonderful for me. They spoke almost to your soul. We had a glorious time—the most glorious time of my life. Professor Armitage, believe me, until you have been to Sicily you have not lived. But you have been there, of course,’ she relapsed.

‘Indeed, yes,’ said the professor, leaning a little back, and looking before him over Cedric’s head. ‘What a land! The footprints of a civilization are still there, but there must be a great deal yet for the searcher, for the archæologist—horrid word!’

Cedric felt an anxiety for some general conversation—an opportunity for drawing Professor Armitage into some general expression of opinion. Nothing could be done except through his host, who sat between them. He glanced at Mr. Sheridan. He caught scraps of the conversation between that gentleman and his partner, a Mrs. Morton.

‘The Bishop himself is to open the schools,’ he was saying. ‘Personally, I look for very good results.’

In the pause which followed Cedric caught his eye, and, leaning towards him, inquired if he busied himself with educational affairs.

‘Why, yes,’ said Mr. Sheridan. ‘In these days, my dear young man, it is only by earnest work and constant application to Almighty God for His aid that we can hope to save our children—the children, I mean, of this country—from becoming heathens.’ He shot out this last word with extraordinary vehemence, and, after glancing sharply right and left, assumed an air of humility not unmingled with a consciousness of moral rectitude, and sipped his wine. He was not a man to shirk from introducing the Deity’s name into conversation at table, least of all at his own board.

'I hope, dear Mr. Sheridan,' Miss Bonsor struck in, 'you are in favour of at least one art subject in all elementary schools.'

Mr. Sheridan did not immediately reply. It was not the moment for a deliberate attack upon the moral danger which he believed to lurk in all æsthetic pursuits, so he avoided the question by saying: 'Our aim should be religion first. No doubt all our talents are bountiful gifts from Him, and we should make the most of them. Oh yes, I am sure I take a very high ideal in the educational problems of to-day.'

Professor Armitage cleared his throat. 'Mr. Sheridan,' said he, 'you have hardly done justice to Miss Bonsor's question. I think you will admit that the position of art in the scheme of education to-day might be very much bettered if the Church and its supporters were to care twopence about it.'

'Oh dear me!' began Mr. Sheridan; but the Professor would not be interrupted. He pushed his plate a little irritably from him, and fingered the adjustments of his pince-nez. 'Just consider for one moment,' he proceeded, in a rather louder tone—the table was listening—'that the Church from almost the earliest times until, indeed, the Renaissance had advanced too far, affected to be, and certainly was, the pre-eminent patron of Art, Letters, and Music.'

'Well, but . . . ' Mr. Sheridan made another attempt.

'You are not going to tell me,' continued Professor Armitage, his eyebrows raised well into his hair, 'that, with this fact in our minds, we must feel satisfied with the bastard or impudent architecture, wishy-washy music, and ill-begotten theology of to-day?'

'Art . . . ' began Miss Bonsor, Miss Galston, and

Mr. Bentham almost simultaneously, and then stopped in deference to each other. Everybody smiled. They relished a general topic. The dramatist gathered himself together for an effort.

'The Church,' said he to the table at large, 'patronized art because it laboured under a delusion.'

'Who laboured under a delusion?' asked Ruth.

'The Church,' replied Lacey with composure.

'What delusion?'—this in general chorus.

Lacey felt distinctly in his element. The candles assumed the brilliancy of footlights. He had his audience; he worked towards a curtain. 'For long art was believed to be Christian. It was a bad day for art when the Church awoke to the pagan nudity of its protégé.'

For a moment no one ventured a remark. The dramatist looked triumphantly round the assembly. He caught Dr. Orley's eye.

'Mr. Lacey,' said that gentleman, pressing his beard over his bent shirt-front, 'has a taste for epigram. So had I when I was his age.' He glanced across at the Professor. 'The question is not so much what the Church has awoke to, but what the State will find when it sets itself out to look. You will have to separate the two. Moreover, to characterize art as pagan or Christian seems to me to be taking a liberty. It is merely an outward expression of the individual.'

'We shall probably see great changes,' chimed in Lacey hurriedly. He recognised that the footlights were flickering. 'Such changes as the appreciation of beauty by the masses and the total abolition of the Nonconformist conscience.'

He looked towards Dr. Orley, but for some time no further words came from that corner of the table.

Mr. Bentham thereupon essayed a short account of an Oxford manor-house, and only stopped when Ruth asked him bluntly how long he had been practising as an architect. To a thoroughly unscholarly man such as was Mr. Bentham, the regular practice of any profession was abhorrent, and he turned such a look of scorn on to Miss Sheridan as caused her some difficulty in suppressing a show of her natural feelings. Mr. Bentham was tolerated at Tite Street on account of his mother, who had been a great friend and contemporary of Mrs. Sheridan's in Italy. While Ruth was endeavouring to apologize for the injustice of her suspicion, Miss Bonsor became almost hysterical in her enthusiasm for cats, from which animals she had apparently derived almost as much pleasure and instruction as her sojourns in Sicily had afforded. Professor Armitage pleaded lamentable ignorance of the manners and habits of cats in such a way as to show Miss Bonsor that, without wishing to appear rude, he had little desire to learn more about them at this juncture.

Ruth spoke to Cedric on any subject that came to mind. He thought she was excited about something. For himself, he did his best to draw the Professor out, but, like Winnington Orley, that gentleman appeared unwilling to say very much in Lacey's presence. Once or twice, however, Professor Armitage spoke to him on literary matters, and Cedric listened eagerly. Dr. Orley was heard to murmur something about a 'tincture of letters' as applying to the latter-day novelists, but a moment later he relapsed into a moody silence, and Mrs. Sheridan was obliged to fall back upon Mrs. Blagden, who, nothing loth, proceeded with her much-interrupted lecture with the utmost complaisance.

When the ladies had retired to the less austere precincts of the drawing-room, Cedric saw to his delight that Dr. Orley took a seat next to the Professor.

'Keep them in order, Mr. Readham,' Ruth had whispered, 'and stop them if they get too "unchurchy"—you know what I mean. It always makes father unbearable afterwards.'

Mr. Sheridan produced cigars and cigarettes, and busied himself with matches; then, when affairs were arranged to his satisfaction, he prepared to start the conversation he judged would meet with the most general approval.

'I wonder,' said he, 'if any of you have seen the Bishop of Peterham's latest book.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Lacey; 'my favourite bishop—he is so nice-looking. Is it a novel?'

'*The World of Opportunity*,' said Mr. Sheridan gravely; 'a collection of philosophical essays.'

'Arrant rubbish!' murmured Dr. Orley, but so low that only Cedric and the Professor heard.

'I am inclined to agree with you,' whispered the latter.

Cedric leant forward in his chair. Mr. Bentham began to criticise the bishop's essays with his host, leaving Lacey to amuse himself by an examination of the dromedary. The other two started a discussion upon the latest of the German philosophers.

Cedric, as he listened, felt that something these men possessed was lacking in himself—not ability, not intellect or application, but perhaps the power of concentration. It was his conscious avoidance of the drudgery in life that had been keeping him back. These men had gone through that drudgery, and he had been supposing that a graduate *ipso facto* must

have done the same. He became strangely humbled. Once again the gates were being opened for him, and he felt that now, more than ever, he could leave 'Denmanism' behind him. And it was characteristic of him that, while he listened to a conversation utterly free from that superficial brilliancy of diction which was the distinguishing mark of so many discussions to which he had listened in the past, his ambitions took clearer shape, and he saw in a vision his next book, differing entirely from those former products of his imagination. He had attempted the portrayal of men who were intellectually his own superiors, and he understood now the reason for his failure. The new book should deal with something fairer, nobler, more truly human. He had been hoodwinked, blinded to all save one aspect of life. For the first time, perhaps, since he had left Cambridge years before, he realized how happy he was to be enjoying physical health, to be out of the slough, as it were, into which only his own idiocy had brought him. He was recalled by the sound of Lacey's voice.

'Yes; I fetched him from Ostend,' the dramatist was saying. 'And it was about time. He is so stupidly indifferent to the opinions of his friends.'

Cedric turned sharply.

'I heard that there was a Lady Sothernmere,' remarked Mr. Bentham. 'Is that mere talk?'

Lacey nodded. 'There will be no Lady Sothernmere yet awhile,' he said. 'My friend could never put up with even the respectability that married life is supposed to entail. He is a perfectly faithless creature—so faithless, indeed, that on two occasions I have made use of him in my plays, and both times he brought down the house.'

'Ah ! you mean the character of Mr. Tortoiseshell,' suggested Mr. Bentham. 'I thought him excellent—quite true to life.'

Lacey made a movement of the hands. 'So now you know who the original was. Do you know my friend Lord Sothernmere, Mr. Readham ?' he continued.

'No I do not,' replied Cedric. He spoke nervously. 'He was pointed out to me at Ostend a few months ago, but I have never met him.'

'I was speaking of that time. He is so rash, that I don't like to let him out of my sight for too long.'

Cedric's lips were slightly apart. He was asking himself whether Lacey would divulge any particulars about the girl who had been with Sothernmere. No ; it was obviously out of the question. He wondered what had put such an idea into his head. Men who were mere acquaintances did not discuss those matters, more especially in the presence of a Mr. Sheridan. 'He went on the stage, did he not ?' he queried.

'He did,' said Lacey, 'thereby proving that he is utterly unaccountable for his actions. It was there that I first met him.'

'He must be an extremely interesting man,' remarked Mr. Bentham, who was by way of being a snob.

'Ah ! very wayward. He gives me a lot of trouble.' Lacey puffed at his cigar contemplatively.

Mr. Sheridan made shift to convey the conversation into less dangerous channels. Cedric turned back to listen again to Dr. Orley. But those few words of Lacey's had succeeded in casting his thoughts in a totally different direction. He could not take in the calm, deliberate, thoughtful utterances of Dr. Orley, nor the terse replies, spoken so easily, of Professor Armitage. He was thinking again of the girl who had

crossed his path months ago, of the illusion that had been, he told himself, dispelled when he had looked into that Ostend dining-room ; of Hetherington's description of the man with the bristly moustache, and of Lacey's words a minute ago. For a time he forgot his surroundings—forgot that he had come to stay with the Mannings, and that he had met Ruth Sheridan. He did not hear Mr. Sheridan propose that they should join the ladies, only followed the others up as in a dream.

Miss Bonsor was singing a German love-song, and Cedric caught sight of Lacey's face. It recalled him. The singer had a beautiful voice, but her appearance at that moment was hardly calculated to lend much weight to the words of her song. Mrs. Blagden was trying to look as if she enjoyed nothing better than a song in a language she but poorly understood. Ruth sat near Miss Galston, looking demure, but laughter dancing in her eyes.

The men stood in the doorway until Miss Bonsor, the song finished, sank down into the recesses of a large arm-chair near Mrs. Sheridan.

' Ah, Professor, I hope you have had an interesting talk with Dr. Orley,' said the latter.

Professor Armitage's face became wreathed in smiles. He had been delighted, he said, with the opportunity he had had of exchanging views with Dr. Orley. Mrs. Sheridan glanced at the recluse, and was inclined to think that he looked rather less bearish than usual, a fact which caused her to suppose that her plans had met with the success they deserved.

Cedric sat down near to Ruth. Miss Galston endeavoured to make him give her a résumé of his various travels in Belgium, possibly with the view of enlightening him as to her own knowledge upon that most

interesting subject, but Cedric was not to be drawn. He wanted to listen rather than to talk. Dr. Orley was speaking. He had begun by telling Mrs. Blagden of his impressions of Norway, a country to which that lady had never been. Gradually, however, his remarks became addressed to the general company. Even Lacey, who at all times was disinclined to play second string, to a certain extent fell under the spell of his clear, soft voice. He could not help thinking how much finer this man's descriptions, interspersed as they were with quaint little observations, stray anecdotes of natives to whom he had spoken, were than the almost grim recitals of Mrs. Blagden's to which he had been compelled to listen at dinner. That lady, too, as she sat bolt upright in the most uncomfortable chair in the room, was attending minutely to Dr. Orley's words. Perhaps she felt their power, for there flashed across her mind the idea that even in the case of her beloved Abyssinia, which she flattered herself was as familiar to her as her own native London, there was much that she had missed. There was more in a country than its geographical peculiarities, the various types of its natives, the nature of its government.

'You see,' said Dr. Orley, after he had told a little story of a Norwegian farmer with whom he had become friendly, 'this man, uncouth as he was, could spare the eggs of a little bird for whose nest he had risked his life, and yet kill his own son. It always comes home to me that the greatest pleasure in travelling about is not to allow the people you see and speak to, to fall into types, and then come back and write about the hardy Norwegian or the beer-drinking Fleming, but to estimate the individual. So many writers of the present day fail utterly because they insist on presenting

a type rather than an individual. We know the type well enough, and yet the character does not ring true. The type does not love. Perhaps they find it easier to write about a type ; to me a study of the individual would seem far easier.' He looked almost whimsically round him.

'Yet on the stage,' said Lacey, 'it is often the type *quâ* type that scores.'

'But on the stage you are at a double disadvantage,' returned Dr. Orley quickly. 'You are obliged to let your words reach the public second-hand, and you have to remember that your audience generally requires something different from what it gets in real life.'

'I suppose that is the secret' of successful drama,' interposed Mr. Bentham.

Dr. Orley shrugged his shoulders. Lacey did not reply, and Ruth uttered a remark upon a totally different subject.

Later, when Cedric was meditating a departure—Winnington Orley, professing much pleasure in the evening's entertainment, had been gone some twenty minutes, and the Professor and Mrs. Blagden were bowing themselves out—Ruth came up to him with a request that he would come with her for a moment to her den.

'Don't look so surprised,' she said ; 'I only want to show you something.'

Cedric followed her up a few stairs into the little room that contained her most treasured possessions. On a small table by the door three books, bound uniformly, were reposing.

'There !' said Ruth with a little laugh ; 'what do you think of those ?'

'My books !' gasped Cedric involuntarily.

'Ah ! you plead guilty, then ?'

‘However did you . . . ?’

‘Oh, Tom Manning told me about them months ago,’ said Ruth calmly, ‘and when I met you I thought I would like to see what you had written. So I bought all the books that Mark Denman has ever written, and I have spent some very interesting hours reading them.’

Cedric gazed at her. ‘And you have brought me here to show me these ?’

A serious look came over her face. She glanced almost affectionately at him. ‘Would you like my real opinion ?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I would.’

‘Well, you wrote those books before you had met the Winnington Orleys and the Henry Armitages of this world, didn’t you ?’

‘I—I suppose so.’

‘I think they are full of big mistakes. You don’t think me rude or boring to say so ? Of course, I am intolerably rude, but . . .’ She looked at him apprehensively.

‘No, no, Miss Sheridan,’ said Cedric hurriedly.

‘And although I’m only eighteen, I’ve seen a good many people, and I think that Mr. Mark Denman has no very high opinion of my own sex. He is inclined to treat them—isn’t he ?—as though they were rather like toys for men to fall back upon when everything else has failed.’

‘Toys for men ?’ repeated Cedric dully. Did she understand the purport of her own words ? Could it be that she had really probed to the bottom those problems which he had set forth to solve in his books ? Cedric remembered with something like shame what a boast of his it had been that in no case had he hesitated to present in the clearest way those sexual problems about which at one time or another he had worried him-

self. Mark Denman had not been afraid to give to the world ideas which, while they appeared to him clean because natural, might not seem so to others, even if Cedric Readham had kept them tightly locked in his breast. The 'Openhearts' had discussed women from every side just as they had discussed everything else, without shame, without hesitancy, and Mark Denman, in giving out his views, had thought only of the truth, the cruel truth, that his pen was committing to paper. Yet, as Cedric now mused almost against his will, some women were as toys to men, and, after all, what he had written was the truth. He looked into Ruth's face.

'Don't you think it is as much a mistake to regard one type of man or woman,' continued the girl, strangely eager, 'as representative of the whole of humanity, as it is to look on the precepts of the Church of England, or, if you like, of the Mohammedan faith, as embracing the whole of truth? Isn't it fairer to think of any religion as part of a truth? But you have written about a group of men and women, and pretended that you were describing the whole race. Mr. Readham, excuse me. I have no right to talk like this, but I always like to understand my friends thoroughly, and to let them understand me in the same way. I think we have become friends quickly; but we are friends, aren't we?'

Cedric reflected afterwards that an absurdly large lump in the throat had made its existence felt at that moment. There had been a touch of his mother's voice in the tones of her last query.

If she was still something of an enigma to him, his own soul had been in part bared to her, a fact that was at once annoying and strangely pleasurable. Yet, whatever he felt about her words, he knew that on a sudden he had realized his liking for her.

CHAPTER VIII

OLIVE RANGER

OF the various professions, from those which are counted amongst the most noble to the lowest vocations which must surely tremble for their very legitimacy, nearly all show two extremes ; but in no other case, perhaps, do such wide discrepancies, both of a technical and a social nature, occur as are to be found in the actor's profession. Here, indeed, the technical status of the actor need not correspond with his social standing ; often the two are wholly different.

So it happens that sometimes in a single company brought together, the good fellowship that apparently exists between its members when on the stage is nothing more than a part—often a very disagreeable part—of their craft. The carpenters in the wings, the dressers in the little rooms at the back of the theatre, and the call-boys, who form, as a rule, a singularly observant body, see more than the front of the house with its audience has an opportunity of witnessing. A collection of individuals—players all, it is true—have come together for a definite purpose, but beyond that they may have nothing in common, and may for social or other reasons refuse to be more than merely cognizant of one another's existence off the stage. Such an unfortunate occurrence as the refusal of two ladies

who, through force of circumstances, are obliged to share the same dressing-room, to be on speaking terms, is no rare one. Professionally they may be equals; socially they may have nothing from which to breed a friendship—often, indeed, good cause for contempt, jealousy, or positive hatred. The author or manager who brings together a company cannot take any considerations into account other than those which are purely professional. A certain actor or actress is wanted for a particular part, another for another, and so on, and for a special play it may be necessary to gather together men and women of a vastly differing calibre and position. It is only natural, then, to expect that such a company as a whole runs every chance of not being in the most desirable harmony. This is especially the case with a touring company, when of necessity its members see more of one another than might happen in London, where the only common meeting-place is very likely the stage itself.

Now, the 'morality of the stage' is really no different from the morality of any other large collection of individuals. True, the general life of an actor, especially when he is 'on tour,' is freer, more bohemian or irregular than that of others with work of a less emotional kind, but this is in reality little inducement towards immorality more than it is towards any other state of being. As may be expected, some companies, consisting almost entirely of players with little pretence either to intellectuality or refinement, appear to be, speaking from the moral standpoint, lower in the scale than others, whose members happen to be of more or less gentle birth, at the very commencement, it may be, of the career they have chosen. A company playing 'comic opera' with a large chorus of girls more notice-

able for their beauty than for their accomplishments, somewhat naturally engenders round itself an atmosphere that is different from the one in which players of a comedy of manners, sent, perhaps, straight from London in its entirety, find themselves. The custodian of the stage-door at a provincial theatre probably sees more types, and more varied types, of men and women than all those whose duties may bring them into contact with representatives of all classes, young or old, rich or poor, honest or the reverse, the artist with his following, or the failure with his tale of hard luck or disaster.

Probably no such heterogeneous group was ever brought together as the company which Mr. Tobias Davenport, in conjunction with Arthur Lacey, assembled one morning in a small house at the back of Victoria Station for a first rehearsal of Lacey's own play, *Sarah-Jane*. Here was a comedy which in the second act brought the audience into contact with a set of characters differing in every possible way, in birth, position, and ideals, from those round about whose fortunes the other acts centred. Lacey was an artist in his way, and the London success had followed largely on the fact of his obtaining in the majority of cases the right players to sustain his parts; and now that the play was about to start on tour, although not more than one or two of the original actors could or would accompany the play on its travels, he was determined to see that *Sarah-Jane* should have every opportunity of continuing its success by a similar policy. With this in view he had, with Mr. Tobias Davenport's aid, obtained what he considered to be the right company. For his second act, which took place within the environs of a country fair, he had secured

the services of several ladies and gentlemen, whose accustomed places were in a company that confined its attention to comic opera, whilst for the more serious characters were cast those for whom hard work and a histrionic talent of no mean order had procured well-deserved reputations.

Though the plot of the play centred round the name-part, Sarah-Jane herself was not the most prominent character. The best 'show' was allotted to Charlotte, a wild, passionate woman, far older than her years, villainess almost to the end, when she broke down on an appeal to her womanhood. In London Lacey had been secretly dissatisfied with the actress who had undertaken the part ; her rendering, it is true, had been almost perfect, but she had somehow not altogether fitted in with his own conception. He discovered the nature of the fault, such as it was, only after the play had run for some weeks—physically she was not the woman Charlotte ; her appearance did not suggest the desired characteristics. Now that there was a chance of remedying this, he determined to spare no pains, but Mr. Davenport, after a fruitless search, was forced, through lack of time in front of him, to suggest that the girl who had understudied the original Charlotte should be entrusted with the part in the provinces. He had come to Lacey's flat in Mount Street one morning to settle the matter.

Mr. Tobias Davenport was a large, ungainly man, with a full round ugly face that never looked quite clean. His skin was shiny, and suggested in its numerous folds something of the professional fat lady. He was this morning dressed in his best frock-coat, and wore a pair of brightly polished boots, which, however, gave one the idea of being borrowed property. He

talked raspingly, and his English was not of the best—he had started life in that almost proverbial starting-place for successful men, a grocer's shop, but he had worked hard, and had deserved to reach his present distinguished position, which was that of managing-director to the touring companies owned by the Smith-Orlebar combination. He came into Lacey's sitting-room with a worried look on his face, and while he wished the dramatist good-morning, took occasion to remove some superfluous moisture from his brow.

'We shall have to fall back on the Carstairs woman,' he said, coming without delay to business.

Lacey offered him his cigarette-case. 'Have one,' he said, 'and sit down. You look tired and hot.'

'No wonder,' wheezed Mr. Davenport. 'I've been all over the place, an' not a slice o' luck.'

'I suppose you've been to Annerley about Miss Gorringe, and seen Miss Templethwaite?'

Mr. Davenport nodded. 'Yes,' said he, 'and there's nothing for it but Miss Carstairs.'

Lacey shook his head. 'I've found the right woman,' he said quietly.

Mr. Davenport became excited. 'Who on earth is she, Mr. Lacey?' he asked.

'Olive Ranger.'

Mr. Davenport put down his unlighted cigarette, and stared at the dramatist. A faint smile, perhaps of incredulity, perhaps of a surprised contempt, more probably of both, caused his mouth to purse up. 'Olive Ranger?' he said hesitatingly. 'She hasn't acted for you before, has she?' He thought for a moment. 'Why, from all accounts she's simply no go, certainly not in a big show like Charlotte. Trevor was saying to me only yesterday that she didn't try—just footled

away whatever she got.' A leer came into his expression. 'And she isn't over-popular just now—too much money to please most people.'

He would have proceeded to give a lengthy account of Miss Ranger's shortcomings, both technical and otherwise, had not Lacey good-humouredly interrupted him.

'I've never seen her act myself,' he said, 'but I've gone to the trouble of interviewing several people who have, and found that there is every reason for supposing that with a little extra trouble we can teach her all and more than is required. She has never taken quite so big a part as *Charlotte* before, but that is no reason why she shouldn't have a try at one now.'

Mr. Davenport looked extremely puzzled. It was so unlike Lacey to speak like this.

'But why this girl more than many others, who've 'ad more experience?'

'Because, my dear Davenport, Olive Ranger is the woman Charlotte; she looks the woman I mean Charlotte to be. I might have drawn the character from her. She fits in even to details, and although I have no special reasons for thinking that at present she acts the villainess any more than most of her kind and sex do, there are possibilities of evolution even in that direction.' He spoke half-jokingly, half-cynically.

'You seem to know 'er private 'ist'ry,' remarked Mr. Davenport, with a touch of malice that was perhaps not altogether involuntary.

Lacey's eyes nearly closed, whilst the eyebrows rose, causing his forehead to show three deeply marked horizontal grooves. 'Yes,' he said calmly, 'I happen to have found out quite a great deal of her private history. I met her first last July, but only got to know

her at all well in November, and only twenty-four hours ago decided to offer her the part of Charlotte. A friend of mine unwittingly did me a great service in introducing me to her. I have learnt that she is resting, and that her last tour was with Robinson in that appalling production *The Seamstress*.'

'In which she was a failure!'

'Very possibly. I took the trouble to see Robinson and obtain his opinion, which I am bound to say coincided with yours, but . . .'

'Well?' Mr. Davenport spoke irritably. Was the immaculate Arthur Lacey about to consider his players as other than mere human machines? Had he suggested this girl for other . . . ?

'As Charlotte she will be superb. I am certain of it. Now, Davenport, trust me in the matter. Write to her and settle up.'

The managing-director grew fidgety. 'You don't think what the rest of the company will say when they learn 'oo's been put over their 'eads. She ain't liked at all, as I said before, and although I'm not squeamish about such things, she's got a damned bad reputation.'

'I should have thought that most beautiful women of her class would find no difficulty in obtaining that,' returned Lacey, smiling, 'and if the company, as you suggest, do show signs of disapproval, I am something of a diplomat myself, and will go out of my way to make things pleasant.'

'Oh, very well, if you are determined. . . .'

'Yes; I should like you to write to her at once. I have the address.'

It was easy to see that the dramatist's mind was made up, and conscious that not a moment was to be lost, Mr. Davenport went straight off to the address which

Lacey had handed him, and then and there proposed terms to the young lady, which were eagerly if shyly accepted.

During the interview in Miss Ranger's comfortably furnished flat Mr. Davenport could not but inwardly comment upon the favourable appearance of this new protégée of Lacey's. Though far from easy in his own mind as to the advisability of allowing the part of Charlotte to rest in Miss Ranger's hands, he understood what the dramatist had meant by saying that she was the woman.

'The first rehearsal,' said he in his brusque manner, when matters had been settled, 'is for to-morrow at Rickerby's in Gillingham Street. Call for eleven o'clock. You can read the part, of course.' Miss Ranger was holding some typewritten pages encased in a brown covering. 'Do what you can with it to-day. We are, as you see, pressed for time. Don't forget, Miss Ranger, eleven to-morrow sharp.'

He left hurriedly.

Later in the day a note arrived for her from Lacey himself. 'I am so glad,' he wrote, 'that things have been settled. You will, I am sure, do your best, and as I shall myself attend all the rehearsals, you will find things quite easy. At the same time, you must be prepared for a spell of hard work. It is, indeed, a fortunate thing that our friend did not succeed in driving you right away from the stage. Such a step would hardly have been fair. Will you do me a favour and be at Gillingham Street to-morrow by ten o'clock? In that case we could talk matters over.'

And so it happened that on the morning of the first rehearsal Miss Olive Ranger left her flat and drove in a hansom to the house in Gillingham Street at an hour

which was usually given over to the first meal of the day. An old woman, ugly of mien, and rejoicing, apparently, in no more than a single garment, which, however, covered her from top to toe, and resembled nothing so much as a sack, showed her up some narrow, creaky stairs into a long, bare room that ran the whole length of the house. It was here that the rehearsal was to be held. The furniture was scanty ; along one side of the room was a piano, an arm-chair the worse for wear, a kitchen - table, and some light cane chairs. These latter stood in a line against one of the walls, all of which were plastered with the advertisements of theatrical agencies, dancing-masters, professors of musical instruments ranging from the banjo to the organ, provincial variety shows, and a host of histrionic technicalities quite unintelligible to the outsider. Save for these posters there was nothing that suggested the stage. Lacey himself was the only person in the room.

‘ Good-morning, Miss Ranger,’ said he. ‘ I’m glad you managed to get here so early. I wanted, if possible, to have a chat with you about the part before the others turned up.’

‘ It’s very kind of you, Mr. Lacey,’ she began, rather nervously. As a rule she was the reverse of nervous, but the events of the last few days, Lacey’s presence, and a doubt of her own ability to sustain the part, had taken away some of her self-confidence.

‘ Not at all,’ replied Lacey. ‘ I offered you the part because I think you are eminently suited for it.’ He proceeded in his inimitable way, with one leg on the chair, to explain to her the character of Charlotte. Sitting in the arm-chair by the piano she listened eagerly.

She was a tall, beautifully made woman, and held

herself superbly. At times the look almost of a child would come over her face, and lead one to suppose that she must be in her eighteenth year, yet a moment later, perhaps, she would force on one the impression of having long said good-bye to all thoughts of childhood. Her full bosom, jet-black hair that was gathered round her head in no particular coiffure, the large, dark, sparkling eyes, and thick—almost too thick—red lips suggested in potent fashion the gipsy. Her complexion was dark, her cheeks generally flushed. One imagined involuntarily that she was ever on the point of allowing all the most violent emotions of a human being to rush out of her in a torrent. There was a tense look in her handsome face, a look that demanded attention from all. 'Here you have a beautiful woman,' it seemed to say; 'here is all the mysterious essence of womanhood.' Her mouth showed no trace of cruelty, only energy, a little determination, but, above all, passion. From a cursory glance one did not associate her with evil, but with something which might perhaps become evil. She was far from brilliant, her intellect was poor, her atmosphere physical rather than mental. If one knew her well, one had only the impression of suppressed animalism to take away, of her capacity to stop at nothing. One might have been vaguely frightened of her, but she would have compelled admiration.

There was little of the spider in her nature, though she unconsciously courted admiration. Lacey in a cynical mood, and before he had thought of approaching her about Charlotte, had once quoted some lines of Swinburne's as applicable to her :

'And they shall know me as ye who have known me here
Last year when I loved Atthis, and this year
When I love thee.'

‘I should like to put lines such as those into her mouth,’ he had said. ‘Your Puritans and other quaint people would understand them well enough.’ Then he had added, with something of a sneer, ‘and if you want to be truly original, you may exclaim when you see her : “God ! how that woman could love !” ’

Little enough was known of her early history. She had gone her own way in the Metropolis, the stage’s cynics said successfully, its prudes with disgrace. And so, if she had achieved but small success behind the footlights, what matter ? Her life satisfied her. She was young still, and a star upon which men loved to gaze. She lived in the present, for the present—she had never done otherwise. Mr. Davenport had spoken of her unpopularity in the profession, nor had he at all exaggerated the real state of affairs. Olive Ranger was unpopular. Perhaps this had followed largely on jealousy, for there was no denying the success she had had with those not directly connected with the stage ; nor had she striven to disguise her contempt for those on the boards whom she had eclipsed—of those who were still the strugglers, still the toilers, towards fame. She had full trust in the power her beauty gave her.

Yet there was that in her which at times marked her off from women of her kind—a glimmer of something noble. She could understand dimly in what different ways a man could like a woman—love a woman ; she could understand how something that she had made utterly alien to herself could appeal to others ; she could appreciate the love of the artist for his work. And it was on such occasions, when something almost of the pupil in her seemed to spring into being suddenly, that the child’s look would come into her face and make her, though she did not know it, more beautiful than before.

Possessed by these noble thoughts, she had once burst into tears on passing by her old Kentish home by the sea. Visions of childhood had come to mind at the sight of the white cliffs up which she had tried to climb in former days, and the London life had been forgotten. Similar thoughts, too, perhaps, had been hers when Lacey had suggested that she should play Charlotte ; he had stirred up in her breast ambitions that had been at once shadowy and uncared for. And now that she was listening to him nothing save the scenes which he was conjuring up were in her mind, and Lacey, if he had not been so intent on his subject, would have seen a look that suggested nothing he might have expected to find.

The Lacey who was explaining his own work, enlarging, as he did so, on the various conceptions of character and incident, bore but slight resemblance to the Lacey who in fountain fashion allowed a splash of epigram to fall lightly from his lips in the many drawing-rooms where he was a very welcome visitor. With his work the dramatist did not play the fool. Every sentence in his plays had been subjected to the closest scrutiny, every interjection, every gesture, studied ; his plays were as remarkable for their polish as for the ingenuity of their plots. As Olive listened to him, she found her part assuming grander proportions, yet at the same time becoming infinitely simpler. Charlotte was being metamorphosed into a woman she could understand. Her excitement increased as her interest and knowledge grew under Lacey's tuition. She was only sorry that the undertaking meant a sojourn of some weeks in the provinces. London's fascinations were strong.

'I see, I see,' she said. 'I understand what you

mean. I shall be able to do it. Thanks so much for your help in . . .'

'It was necessary, Miss Ranger.' Lacey smiled almost triumphantly. 'You see now what sort of a woman Charlotte is?'

'I do,' said Olive Ranger. She paused a moment. A curious look came over her face. 'Do you like Charlotte?' she asked at last.

Lacey, for some reason or other, became vague. 'She is very human,' he said, 'and so, I suppose, very lovable.'

The door opened to admit the burly figure of Mr. Davenport clothed in a mass of furs, which, however, were not of such a nature as to allow of a very close scrutiny. He removed a glossy top-hat, was charmed to see Miss Ranger, and hoped Lacey had not found the room too cold. Then he removed his furs, and appeared somewhat less bulky in a shabby brown suit, the pockets of which were bulging with papers.

'The "call" was for eleven,' he announced.

'It must be nearly that now, isn't it?' said Lacey.

'It wants fifteen minutes,' replied Mr. Davenport. He took the papers out of his pockets and put them on the table.

'I have just had the pleasure of going through Miss Ranger's part with her,' said Lacey, walking over to the window. 'Ah!' he added, 'here we have Miss Featherstone.'

'We shan't want for talk now,' observed Mr. Davenport.

Miss Featherstone, a small dark lady, attired in a brown cloak, in front of which dangled an imposing gold chain-bag, hurried into the room, and greeted Lacey with some effusion. She began talking in a very

shrill voice and with extreme rapidity, as though, indeed, there were but a few minutes open to her to say what should occupy a whole morning. Catching sight of Miss Ranger sitting in a corner, she treated that lady to a rather distant bow. Olive's presence was evidently unexpected, and occasioned her some considerable surprise, which, however, she succeeded in cloaking under a hurried account of her own difficulties in reaching Gillingham Street from the purlieu of St. John's Wood, and a few eulogistic remarks about a certain baronet of her acquaintance apropos of nothing in particular. Even Lacey, who rarely permitted himself to become an audience for very long, was obliged to allow Miss Featherstone's tongue to run itself out. She was a clever actress, kindly curious, with a love of hearing her own voice, and with a surprising worship, honest enough, for the aristocracy of her country.

Whilst she was chattering away, now to the dramatist, now to Mr. Davenport, her thoughts were more or less centring round Miss Ranger. Her curiosity—she was not of a jealous disposition—was further aroused on her being informed that Miss Ranger had been cast for Charlotte. But then, she reflected, Mr. Lacey was at all times rather an odd man. Still, Olive Ranger of all people!

'I thought you had left us for good, Miss Ranger,' she could not refrain from saying.

Olive looked up.

'Oh, no.'

'I persuaded her to play the part of Charlotte.' Lacey had noticed Olive's half-hidden look of disdain. It was the Featherstones of the stage who bored her so much, the fussy little creatures who seemed so passionless, so insipid. Frankly, she could not understand them.

'Ah!' said Miss Featherstone in answer to Lacey's remark; but she could not, oddly enough, think of anything else to say.

Several other men and women now came into the room. Mr. Davenport assumed an air of fussiness which made him appear rather ludicrous. Three young men, respectively Mr. Pilling, Mr. Topham, and Mr. Throstle, made their appearance, and took up positions against the wall that faced the window. They bowed awkwardly to the ladies present, and began talking amongst themselves.

'Olive Ranger!' whispered Mr. Throstle, a little dark man, with oily hair and a long skull-shaped face.

'M' yes,' Mr. Pilling whispered back. 'Damn funny lot, I should say.'

'Very heterogeneous,' was Mr. Topham's comment. Mr. Topham had been to a public school, a privilege which existed only in the imagination of Mr. Pilling, who was the son of Nicholas Pilling, pawnbroker, of Birmingham, and, indeed, of Mr. Throstle, whose parentage was too doubtful to be of much use to him. Mr. Topham, however, had learnt Latin, and sometimes misquoted it with much effect.

'I knew Fenton would take "Sir Joshua,"' remarked Mr. Throstle, as a tall man with a slouch hat and long light overcoat came into the room. 'By Jove, we *are* a company!'

'And a half,' added Mr. Pilling waggishly. 'Here's Causton.' A tiny creature, fat and ungainly, with a little round smirking face, waddled into the room, followed by a severe-looking woman, tall and thin, with pointed features. This lady was none other than Miss Clarissa Gormaston, of great renown in the provinces, though but slightly familiar to London playgoers.

She nodded affably all round, and entered into earnest confabulation with Lacey.

A few words from Mr. Davenport, and the rehearsal started.

A first rehearsal is always more or less in the nature of an introductory lesson, and this one was no exception. Lacey lectured, Mr. Davenport fussed. The latter, besides being directly responsible for the company, was also producing the play. Until he had his players well under him—to use his own expression—he was afflicted with ‘nerves’; and it was from this unfortunate possession that his fussiness followed. Lacey and Mr. Davenport between them endeavoured to secure the united attention of some thirty men and women, and succeeded as well as could be expected. Some little trouble, however, was given by Miss Featherstone, who, with a view of amusing the others and at the same time of drawing attention to herself, occasionally allowed her remarks to become too audible even for Mr. Davenport, who was usually most good-natured; but she was induced at last to give her whole attention to the business which had brought her into such plebeian quarters, and the rehearsal proceeded.

During the day Mr. Davenport lost his nervousness, and showed himself in his true form. He was perfectly indefatigable about each and all of the details, the importance of which Lacey from time to time took occasion to suggest to him. The dramatist said nothing either particularly encouraging or the reverse to Olive Ranger. It was, of course, well-nigh impossible to tell from a first rehearsal held in this room, away as it was from the stage and all its appurtenances, into what shape the play would ultimately resolve itself, and Lacey was at all times sparing in his praise. In the case of Olive Ranger, moreover, his powers of discrimination

were in a way at stake. He wanted her to be a success in the part ; he was determined that she should be all that could be desired, and although on this day he said nothing, not even to Davenport, he was far from feeling a disappointment. Olive forbore to ask for his opinion. Once or twice she felt sorry she had agreed to come back to the stage, even though it might mean further success. She foresaw the attractiveness of such a part as Charlotte, but there was no difficulty in seeing that Miss Gormaston regarded her in no friendly spirit. 'But I shall eclipse her,' mused Olive, and the thought was comforting. Miss Gormaston, it must be said, sulked steadily throughout the day, and on several occasions, when his patience was sorely tried, Mr. Davenport had to confess to himself that he preferred even Miss Featherstone's busy tongue to this other woman's stony glare and irritating mannerisms.

About a quarter to four the managing-director gathered up his papers and, to the relief of everyone, announced that work for the day was over. Olive lingered behind. Ultimately she found herself on the stairs with Lacey by her side. Once out of the room, his whole manner changed. He merely remarked on the abnormal superfluity of black cats in the neighbourhood. They were, he said, after bouquets and archdeacons, his pet aversion.

Outside a large crimson-painted motor-car was standing, the engine still, the solitary occupant huddled up in furs in the front seat.

'Hullo, Sothernmere !' cried Lacey.

The man in the car looked round.

'So there you are,' he said with a little chuckle. 'I thought you were never coming.' He raised his cap. 'What d'you think of him, Olive ? He says three o'clock, and comes out at four, leaving me to die of

cold and misery ! Shows what a damned liar he is, don't it ?'

Lacey smiled indulgently. 'Don't be insulting,' he said. 'We can't survive insults after a hard day's work, you know.'

'Well, what's the programme ?'

'Oh, you're both coming home to tea with me,' said Olive. 'You will come, Mr. Lacey, won't you ?'

'Charmed.' He helped her into the seat next to Lord Sothernmere, and then looked up at his friend. 'I suppose you want the wretched thing started.'

Lord Sothernmere chuckled again. 'Well, after you've kept me waiting an hour, I should about think so. Just give the handle a few turns and jump up.'

Lacey did as he was bid, and the car started.

Speaking of lords in contradistinction to authors, whom he stigmatizes as 'poor devils,' Hazlitt has occasion to observe that they are possessed of 'the benefit of education, society, confidence,' and he adds that 'they read books, purchase pictures, breed horses, learn to ride, dance, and fence, look after their estates, travel abroad.' Had he been dealing with two such opposite men as Arthur Lacey and George Gardner-Lathom, fourth Earl of Sothernmere, he might have with reason transposed his remarks ; for whilst the dramatist occupied himself in his spare moments with all those cited recreations, with a possible exception in the case of horse-breeding, Lord Sothernmere had at the mouth of more than one acquaintance fallen under the definition of 'poor devil.' Such an expression may merely imply contempt, or it may carry with it a qualified sympathy. In the case of Sothernmere, it meant that all the eccentricities daily observable in his lordship's demeanour were the out-

come of a brain not altogether in proper working order. To put it plainly, the majority thought him a little mad. There was, however, a minority, and in this were included those who had through some cause or another come into close contact with him, which considered him eminently sane, but something of a cad. There were many who were proud to claim his friendship—he was wealthy and generous with his money—but it could not be said that he was on really intimate terms with anyone of his own sex, save, indeed, Lacey, who regarded him, and did not scruple to tell him so, as an erratic creature needing care and close attention if he were to be kept out of the police courts. But if the dramatist considered his friend as a boy whom it was dangerous to ‘allow out at nights’—he was wont to use this phrase—he honestly liked the man, and had, on more occasions than even Sothernmere himself suspected, got the unfortunate nobleman out of some very disagreeable scrapes. Theirs was a friendship at which men could do nothing but laugh. There was in it, they said, so much of the ludicrous.

The Earl was still a young man, barely thirty, dark, heavily built, sallow-complexioned, with a stoop that was at all times pronounced. The son of a father who had quarrelled with his wife and subsequently drunk himself to death, the young peer had passed his childhood amidst none too beneficent or healthful surroundings. Brought up in the house of an uncle, a caustic radical, who with his great schemes for the public good filling up his mental horizon, had had no time to bestow either upon his own children, or upon Sothernmere, the latter had grown to man’s estate without mixing in that society in whose midst his birth entitled him to move. Then, when he had thrown off all authority,

save his own inclination, he had stood aloof from the doors which London society was only too ready to open to any peer, rich or otherwise, preferring a more exciting life amongst a class of people who collectively passed for Bohemians. A whim had taken him on to the stage, and he had acted small parts under a pseudonym. Tired of that, he had startled people by running a circus ; and its failure only led him to commit other extravagances of a less honourable kind. He announced one day to Lacey that the only thing worth studying was woman, and forthwith proceeded to make violent love to a dancer at the Empire, who, however, gave him to understand that marriage was the only bargain she could consider. But others had appeared, quickly enough, who were hardly so particular as the dancer, and in a short time it was seen that his lordship proposed to devote himself in earnest to such amorous pleasures as might have satisfied Count Fathom or charmed the heart of Don Juan himself. The dowagers regretfully struck his name off their lists of eligibles ; a few cut him. Lacey spoke of him as ' my poor villain,' and for his friend's sake circulated a rumour that the unfortunate symptoms which had hurried off the second peer to a lunatic asylum were unhappily making their appearance in his grandson. In many houses, however, he was still a welcome guest. Those who did not trouble themselves overmuch with the joys of scandal-mongering were content to receive him for what they considered him to be—a gay, high-spirited youngster, who refused to grow old. On the other hand, stories were constantly being told in the smoking-rooms, and men laughed. Did the stories wear an ugly look, they sometimes sneered, but more often remembered Lacey's words, and recalled the unhappy ending

to the second earl's brilliant career. But to Sothernmere nothing seemed to make any difference ; he pursued the uneven tenor of his way, and gave no thought save to his own beloved self.

In the midst of his wanderings he had come across Miss Ranger sustaining a small part on the stage of one of the provincial theatres. To effect an introduction had been a matter of no difficulty, and in a week the two were on terms of intimacy. At his bidding she had thrown up her theatrical engagements, and been ensconced in a London flat. Former admirers were relegated to a background of obscurity, as far as she was concerned, and under his lordship's protection she had passed many an agreeable week, wanting nothing, treated to the best of everything. In her way she was fond of this man, and he was inclined to believe that he had at last met a woman who was showing him the true meaning of love.

'You will both tire of each other,' said Lacey to him one day.

'You're a good fellow,' retorted Sothernmere, 'but if you repeat that, you'll only be making a fool of yourself, and I shan't like you any the better for it. Olive is selfish and all that, but I'm hanged if she doesn't love me.' It is the selfish man who first sees a love of self in others, a fact which follows on our desire to discover in others those of our weaknesses which in ourselves we attempt to ignore.

'Women like that don't often love for long,' Lacey had replied.

Sothernmere retort had not been polite, and Lacey had judged it better not to pursue the subject.

Now, as he sat behind these two in the car, his thoughts reverted to that short conversation. Was it

a comedy or a farce ? Might it perhaps contain those elements which so often went to make up a tragedy ? Since his professional interest had been aroused in Olive, he had come to the conclusion that she possessed some characteristics but rarely to be found in women of her class. Was Sothernmere to continue in the way he was going ? Was the girl to live the life that was, after all, nothing but a deception ? 'Is it,' said he to himself, 'to be just one of those ordinary liaisons which happen every day, or is it to be something out of the common, I wonder ? The girl—is she girl or woman ?—is excessively interesting, not the least so because there is a mask about her somewhere, and she doesn't know it. Is there a mask ? Of course there is. There is something else, but I don't know what it is. Yet, perhaps she is only acting with me as she does with Sothernmere. Good God !' he said aloud, 'how tantalizing not to be able to see into other people's hearts ! I can get no more than the merest glimmer.' He shrugged his shoulders. After all, it was Sothernmere who interested him most, and he did not fear that his friend would go so far as to propose marriage to this girl of the people. Sothernmere was not a marrying man, yet he had been angry with him for suggesting that he would ever tire of her. Well, it was not the first time that had happened. He laughed softly as he thought how paternal in its solicitude was his attitude to these two. On all occasions he liked to play mentor ; it flattered a sense of his own powers and importance.

The car stopped in front of a block of flats in the region of Gloucester Square. Olive and Lacey went inside, whilst Sothernmere took his car into a neighbouring garage.

'Now for tea,' said Olive, leading the way into a cosily furnished little room. A bright fire was burning, and in the fender reposed some dishes of hot cake.

'You'll find cigarettes in the silver box,' and the hostess put the kettle into closer contact with the flames.

'Thanks.' Lacey helped himself, and sat down in a chair. 'You know,' said he, 'our good friend Sothernmere is a villainous sort of person. There's no knowing to what lengths he won't go to stop you from going on with the part if the whim seizes him. But you must . . .'

'Oh, I'll keep him in order.' When the door of her own flat had closed behind them, that in Lacey which had awed her as the preceptor, as the creator of the woman in whom she was to merge herself, had disappeared, to leave only a man of her acquaintance. Here she was hostess, Lacey only a guest. She unconsciously appreciated the change. So, when the undergraduate in the privacy of his own rooms dispenses hospitality in the shape of a dish of bohea to his Dean, who, were the conditions reversed, would in all probability proceed rapidly and with becoming gravity of countenance from the subject of tea to that of the use and abuse of chapels, there creeps into the atmosphere some subtle influence which removes all thoughts of *in statu pupillari*, without, perhaps, allowing its presence to be observed. And how poor a thing would life be without this! There had been much of the student in Olive that day; now she was once again the woman. Yet she herself knew nothing of the nature of the change. It was Lacey who was the student now, and he smiled inwardly as he realized these things. He

talked about muffins, and quoted from the *Importance of being Earnest*.

For a few minutes they behaved in a fashion that might have made Sothernmere jealous had Olive's guest been other than Lacey. It had never entered into his lordship's mind that the dramatist was possessed of those qualities which were the prerogatives of most of his own sex. To him Lacey was a being apart. To his mind humanity had been divided into women—they occupied first place—Lacey, who sat in a sort of stately grandeur in the middle, with eyes that took in most things, and other men. The last hardly came into his consideration at all.

The door opened and Sothernmere came in.

'Hullo! Now for tea, and none of your damned theatrical shop. Olive, if you're not careful, he'll worry you to death, the scoundrel.'

They devoured muffins.

In half an hour Lacey rose to go. 'I have to dine early with the Baron Horloge,' he announced. 'I have promised to look over some manuscript of his. He is constantly translating English plays a day too late. Some of our plays do appear in French, but never the Baron's adaptations. Poor man! he wants to be wound up more frequently.'

'So long, Lacey,' said Sothernmere. 'See you some time to-morrow, I suppose.'

Lacey lit another cigarette, and went out.

Olive came up to Sothernmere, and put her arms round his shoulders. 'Well, old boy,' she said, 'you're not sick at my going into this show, are you?'

'Lord, no,' said he cheerfully. Nothing would have disturbed his temper at that moment. He kissed her.

Then a thought that had been hovering round her brain made itself clear. She disengaged herself from him. Somehow, the nature of the thought made that necessary. 'I'm just keen about it,' she said.

Sothornmere did not notice the altered look on her face.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH MR. SHERIDAN IS MOVED TO HOSTILITY

DURING Cedric's stay at Sloane Street Tom Manning had ample cause for assuming that his friend's presence was proving a veritable godsend. Blanche, who had been back now some weeks, had never before so fully entered into all his little wishes, his petty schemes. Never before had the intervals between the regrettable affairs, which gave him so many hours of painful anxiety, been of such lengthy duration. He had positively nothing to say against Blanche. She showed all the affection he could have desired ; there was not the least cause for the smallest jealousy. As the days passed, his heart warmed more and more towards this excellent friend who, all unwittingly, was working such wonders.

Such an agreeable state of affairs may be said to have followed on two facts. In the first place, Tom and his wife had taken it into their heads that the sole object of their existence was to bring about a marriage between Cedric and Ruth Sheridan. In the second, they neither of them were aware to what a great extent the same idea had pervaded the other's mind, and this, notwithstanding the frequent confabulations upon the subject in which they delighted to indulge ! Blanche on her part could not understand how anyone not of her own

sex could possibly take an interest in any affair which she regarded as purely feminine. Her husband, lost to everything save his desire for the marriage, and the very clear fact that Blanche had come to see what she owed him in the way of marital affection, saw in his wife's interest in the matter of Cedric nothing more than a wish to show by helping him in every little way how truly penitent she was for former displays of waywardness. It is small matter for wonder, then, that Cedric and Ruth Sheridan saw more of each other than might have been the case had the Mannings been busied with other affairs.

Like her husband, Mrs. Manning had a frank admiration for the Sheridan household, but she differed from him in her opinion of Mr. Sheridan himself. Tom thought the latter a rather narrow-minded man in whom, however, there was much that was good. Mr. Sheridan, he knew, was devoted to the Church, and where the Church was concerned Tom had always felt it incumbent upon him to feel a certain decent awe. The tenets of the faith in which he had been brought up did not worry him in the least, but he considered that to be in any way actively hostile to any form of religious opinion was in itself wrong. Though they might not mean very much to him, he was seldom lax in the ceremony of uttering at his bedside the few prayers which had sufficed him since early childhood. And so, if Mr. Sheridan showed strong religious tendencies, he saw no reason for allowing the fact to influence his judgment. On the other hand, Blanche frankly considered Mr. Sheridan a humbug. But now that she was exerting herself so strenuously on Cedric's behalf, she began to realize that Mr. Sheridan, humbug or not, would soon show himself in a hostile spirit, if he had

not already done so. Once in her hearing the master of No. 138, Tite Street, had delivered a short lecture in the course of conversation on the evils attendant upon early marriages. Cedric had been in the room at the time, and had—rashly, as Blanche thought—suggested that any such evils were more than counterbalanced by the benefits which would in all probability accrue thereby. The helping hand of a woman, he had said, was so often required by a man at the beginning of maturity, when the greatest temptations to go astray were put before him. Mr. Sheridan had retorted that such duties as his young friend had mentioned fell to the lot of the mother. Blanche remembered with what difficulty she had refrained from laughing at the subsequent discussion, but she understood now that Cedric was not taking pains enough to cultivate Mr. Sheridan's good opinion. He showed no signs of being interested in the various religious works which meant so much to that gentleman. Having taken it for granted that Cedric was just as anxious as herself to bring about the marriage, she was annoyed to find him so tactless. Once, indeed, he had even gone so far as to dispute a point of dogma with Mr. Sheridan, and had given it as his opinion that nothing should be accepted as true without being proved 'by reason.' Such an announcement had hardly been suited to a man of limited intellectual powers as was Mr. Sheridan. He had fidgeted first, then fumed, and finally gone out of the room.

'Now, this sort of thing,' said Blanche to her husband that night as they were preparing for slumber, 'will be absolutely fatal. We must stop him. He is so stupid about it. Fancy saying what one really thinks to Mr. Sheridan of all people! I went hot all

over when they started to argue this afternoon. Of course Mr. Sheridan doesn't realize that Mr. Readham has written books, and knows much more about things than he does himself. It is all so stupid. I could see that Ruth was dying to join in, but she at any rate has some tact.'

'It is awkward,' agreed honest Tom; 'but it's no good speaking to him about it.'

'And,' continued his wife, 'I've more than a suspicion that Mr. Sheridan, if he wants a son-in-law at all, has his eye on Mr. Barnett.'

Tom looked worried. The same idea had occurred to him. His difficulties were on the increase. Cedric himself was no help at all. 'But, of course, B.,' said he, 'a girl can marry the man she wants. We don't live in the Middle Ages.'

'You silly! Who says we do? But you know perfectly well what Mr. Sheridan is.'

Tom, who was in process of drying his hands at the moment, paused in the operation to scratch his ear. It meant that he was endeavouring to think in earnest.

Suddenly from the next room came sounds of a very hearty laugh. The conspirators looked at each other almost guiltily.

'He can't have said anything to her, can he?' said Tom in low tones.

Mrs. Manning looked puzzled. To hear any such sound from Cedric's apartment was an unusual occurrence. She shook her head. 'He's in love with her, but the silly fellow doesn't know it. Of course, I knew it from the beginning. And Ruth loves him. It's delicious. I've seen it in her face, and one woman can't deceive another in that sort of thing. I suppose he's laughing about this afternoon. It was all so jolly

till Mr. Sheridan came in—at least, I suppose it was, but, as a matter of fact, Cedric and the girl retired to that curious little room of hers. She's read his books, you know.'

'The deuce! Why, Cedric told me he didn't want them mentioned.'

'Stupid! You told her about them months ago.'

Tom's mouth opened to its widest extent. 'Good Lord, so I did! Well, it can't be helped,' he added philosophically.

Another smothered noise reached them. Husband looked at wife. 'He may be able to hear us,' he suggested, but Blanche scouted the idea.

'We must sleep on the problem,' she observed. 'Oh, thank Heaven, my dear good stupid boy, that you have never shown the least inclination to think off the track or write books. I should have had such a dreadful time with you.'

For a moment Tom wondered whether he might legitimately see an implied insult in her words, and work up a little scene, but he wisely refrained, and for a time dismissed Cedric from his mind.

And Cedric, as he lay on his bed, indulged in a series of thoughts of the most pleasurable kind. He could have wished that the dear old dowager at Chipton was with him now. How altered she would have found him! How different from that poor creature who had left her house a few weeks ago! A veil had been lifted since then, and the dull greyness of things had vanished. And how infinitely preferable was this new life of his, with the new threads to be picked up, the new joys to be experienced, the new interests to be aroused at every hour! Before, he had not troubled to meet the Winnington Orleys, the Hernrodts, above all, the Ruth

Sheridans. He had been playing but a dismal game with life—a game that had been no game at all, but a mere pretence. He thought of his mother. How pleased she would have been, had she known of these changes in her son—the changes she had always been waiting for with such patience.'

Dear little mother! how sad to think that she could not enjoy with him this new life that was only just beginning. For it was a new life, stronger, healthier, better in every way than the old one. Poor little mother! he understood now that she had foreseen the day when her misanthropic child would tear down the veil which only he himself had put up, and see as others saw.

He could appreciate Tom's solicitude now. True, only a few weeks back, he had been laughing at his friend's schemings; but things were altered now. Ruth and he had become fast friends. He was finding something infinitely soothing in their friendship. He knew she liked him. He felt, too, that of her friends he, perhaps, was slowly but surely becoming the closest of all. Day by day there was something new to discuss—some book, some phrase, some aspect of life, and little by little their conversation centred more round themselves, the while Cedric became more boyish, more like the freshman whom the University had greeted with open arms, and Ruth began to realize that the future might be fraught with wonderful happenings. It was a strange time for both of them.

A week before, he had told her the story of the 'Openhearts' and of his own reputation at the end of Cambridge days. His narrative had evolved itself out of a discussion that had begun with Mrs. Grundy of sainted memory, and proceeded by roundabout ways

to the question of faith. She had listened eagerly to him. There seemed to be so little that he could not tell to her, and he felt that much which had always been more or less inexplicable to his mother was clear to Ruth Sheridan. It was something entirely new, this discovery of a confidant.

‘And so,’ Ruth had said, ‘you “Openhearts” used in effect to talk about things as if you knew all about them!’

‘Precisely,’ laughed Cedric. His face grew grave. ‘And then we confined our attention . . .’

‘To the problems which I believe a certain Mr. Denman set himself out to solve.’

‘We were not politic,’ continued Cedric, ignoring her interruption. ‘People thought us a bad lot.’

‘Which you probably were!’

‘Oh, bad enough. Hasn’t Mr. Barnett said anything to you about us?’

Ruth laughed merrily. She had not seen the clergyman so often of late, and now when Cedric was speaking, she was conscious that she had not missed him. ‘How could he talk about anything that wasn’t quite—well, churchy? But I’ll tell you one thing, Mr. Readham. It’s lucky that my father does not know about Mark Denman and the “Openhearts.” You know what he is.’

Cedric did not answer for a moment.

‘Well, what are you thinking about? Have a cigarette, unless you want to go into the drawing-room. But Blanche and mother are quite happy. They talk dogs, you know,’ she added. ‘Now sit down, and tell me why you stood stock still, and didn’t take any notice of me. You’ve done that once before, and it’s very rude.’

‘Have I? I’m so sorry.’ Cedric sat down in a chair near the fire. Ruth faced him.

‘Well?’ said the latter.

‘Well, as a matter of fact,’ began Cedric, ‘I was wondering why you called me Mr. Readham.’

‘Do you want me to call you Mr. Denman?’

‘Heaven forbid!’ cried Cedric. ‘My name is Cedric.’ He puffed at his cigarette.

‘I know that.’

‘I thought you might like to call me by that name. It’s more friendly.’

‘Of course it is. I’ll call you Cedric—but only in private yet.’

‘Then of course you would be Ruth!’

They had laughed.

And now, as Cedric recalled the little scene in all its details, it seemed to be a presage of some other scene in the near future, one to which it was useless to look forward from its very haziness. But he was not thinking of the future at all, only remembering word by word what Ruth had said. He talked to himself, laughed aloud for very joy. ‘This is the beginning,’ he murmured—‘the beginning,’ he repeated again and again. And he did not ask himself the beginning of what.

On the following day Mr. Sheridan took a holiday. He announced this fact to his family at the breakfast-table. It was an unusual thing for him to miss a business day in the city. Mrs. Sheridan appeared worried.

‘My dear father, whatever for?’ queried Ruth.

‘I may surely take a holiday when I want to,’ retorted her father testily. ‘You are really most impertinent at times, Ruth.’

'My dear !' began Mrs. Sheridan.

'I am lunching with the Bishop of Bayswater,' continued her husband with a gravity befitting the dignity of the suffragan to whom he had referred ; 'and I also wish to see one or two friends.'

Ruth was silent. Mrs. Sheridan, who knew from infallible signs that something had upset her husband, endeavoured to appease him by a commendable attempt to keep the conversation on the subject of the Bishop, although that Right Reverend gentleman inspired in her breast no feelings either of regard or admiration. She could not rid herself of the idea that her husband had taken a keen dislike to Cedric Readham. For herself, she had no hesitation in saying that she shared the Mannings' opinion of him. No confidences had passed between mother and daughter on the subject, but she knew that he had quite unassumingly stepped into a position of the closest friendship with both of them. She had felt that in some ways Cedric was still suffering from the loss of his mother, and she would have liked to take in part that dead woman's place. Once or twice she had spoken to him, as mothers may speak to their sons, and Cedric had allowed, perhaps unconsciously, the boy in him to come to the surface. Mrs. Sheridan, indeed, saw in him much of the boy mixed with that which she had hitherto seen only in older men. On the previous day she had observed her husband's behaviour when Cedric had ventured to say more than most people who knew Mr. Sheridan would have considered politic under the circumstances. To say the truth, Cedric had given little thought to the master of the house. He had seen him but seldom, and after a few meetings had put him down as a religious fanatic, without any sense of

humour whatever, and perfectly devoid of all those qualities which did so much to make his wife and daughter so full of charm.

This morning Mrs. Sheridan had to confess to herself that her husband's behaviour was only what might have been expected. She understood so well in what way Cedric looked upon her husband, but it had been so difficult—impossible, she had thought—to speak to the boy about it. She caught her daughter's eye, and could not help smiling. Ruth, perhaps, was more sanguine than her mother, or more sure of ultimately bringing her father to the required point of view.

The breakfast was hardly a success. Mr. Sheridan made it quite plain to his family that for the future he was not going to have Ruth gallivanting—he had the word from a fellow churchwarden—about the place with whomsoever she pleased. Several people, he said with sudden heat, had spoken to him on the subject of his imprudent daughter, and he was determined that thiags should be altered, and altered for the better. The last phrase he repeated with a slightly different intonation, as though he had been giving out a text. His wife and daughter stared at him.

‘It is no good looking cross,’ he continued. ‘I am sick and tired of telling you, Ruth, not to go on in this way.’

‘In what way?’ asked Ruth, helping herself to marmalade.

‘You know very well what I mean,’ retorted her father. ‘You are always about with someone. You take no interest in any of the nobler pursuits of life. In short, you . . . you gallivant.’

‘A hermit . . .’ began Ruth, laughing. She stopped. ‘Why, you haven’t scolded me lately!’ she exclaimed.

‘That is because I hate above all things to quarrel with my family. Such a quarrel has all the disastrous elements of a civil war.’ He looked at his daughter sharply. ‘If I have any more trouble, however,’ he went on, ‘I shall immediately remove you from the art schools.’ In the heat of the moment, he did not remember that a similar threat had on no less than six occasions been used before with no effect.

Ruth shrugged her shoulders. She felt it was useless to argue upon such a point at the breakfast-table. She contented herself by taking advantage of a moment when her father’s face was largely hidden behind his teacup to wink at her mother.

Nothing then could have easily disturbed her peace of mind. There was stealing over her the conviction that Cedric was different from her other friends. Before, the loss of a friend had meant much unhappiness, which had not altogether disappeared when others had taken the lost one’s place ; now she knew that she was losing Jack Barnett—she knew, too, that he knew it, but would have owned nothing to him—and it meant nothing much to her. She had told herself that were she to see none of her old friends again, no one save this new friend of hers, who was still so strange to her, although so much of his nature had been made clear, she would have felt that nothing was wanting. She remembered her old definition of love. Disorganized friendship ! Did it fit the cap now ? She had laughingly supposed herself to be in the wrong. And if she was finding love, how true it was that no disguise could long conceal its whereabouts ! To Ruth now it seemed that her father’s words implied nothing but ignorance. He had called her imprudent. She was inclined to agree with him on that point alone. There

was a sense of subtle joy in being reckless in any matter that concerned Cedric Readham. Prudence and love, as has been remarked, are not made for one another ; as love grows, prudence takes to wings. Ruth had come to the conclusion, moreover, that platonic love, so called, was platonic nonsense.

Mr. Sheridan left his house that morning with his mind full of those thoughts he imagined must have filled the breasts of Crusaders setting forth from their native lands. Matters had come to a head ; something definite must be done without delay. As he had said, civil war in any form was abhorrent to him, but with a bishop and others, whose opinions would no doubt coincide with the prelate's, behind him, he felt that any such war would take on the aspect of a very legitimate and a very holy strife. He remembered that old-time phrase, *Defender of the Faith*, and judged that perhaps in some small degree it might be applied to himself. He further solaced himself with the reflection that his own unselfishness in the matter was proved by the voluntary holiday he was inflicting upon himself at a time when his presence in the City was urgently required. But the time was ripe for an assertion of his authority, and Readham's blasphemy—so he termed the more or less reasonable argument advanced by that gentleman—had goaded him into taking severe measures. It had been quite true that more than one of his own particular friends—one and all chosen from the Church's most ardent supporters—had spoken to him on the subject of his daughter. As yet he did not realize that Ruth looked upon Cedric in any way other than as one of her numerous friends, but a girl was known by her friends, and Mr. Sheridan had come to the conclusion—not, indeed, without some considera-

tion, prolonged if biased—that Readham at any rate was a man whom it behoved his daughter not to know. And so the plans for the day included a visit to the Reverend John Barnett, with a view of learning anything about Readham's past which might help his own dislike to the man. Mr. Sheridan thought he was being as fair as the case demanded, and sallied forth with every sign of conscious rectitude—a supporter, for the time being, of the Church Militant.

The Bishop received him in a library which, from the nature of the books in their cases and the papers and periodicals scattered on tables and chairs, suggested a dabbler in letters rather than a pillar of the Church. As a matter of fact, he wrote novels in his spare moments, and considered Rousseau and his school of greater interest than Locke or Tillotson. For Swift he had a high admiration, and occasionally dipped into the poetry of Byron or the frivolities of Wilde. He possessed an unlimited knowledge of the nobility of his country, and owed his advancement as much to an ability to suit himself to whatever audience inclination or necessity had brought him, as to the extent of his scholarship or the orthodoxy of the doctrines he preached. He was a bachelor with a rubicund face; and hands noticeable for their great size. A piano stood in his room, and a few pictures of anything but a religious tendency adorned his walls. He had a habit of interlocking his hands when talking, and flattered himself on his power of understanding at all times what was required of him. A wit had once remarked that the Bishop was to the Church what Lacey was to the drama; but this was only true in so far as results were concerned. The two men were, perhaps, artists in their way, but they worked upon very different

plans. Lacey possessed an unexpected gift of thoroughness ; the Bishop relied on his portly presence and the apron, which, with the other adornments of his person, whether inside the Church or without, meant so much to him.

A visit from Mr. Sheridan bored him as much as did a discussion upon some abstruse problem in theology with his fellow-prelates, but he had long made it a rule to court friends rather than enemies, no matter what position of life might be theirs. Incidentally, moreover, Mr. Sheridan had been responsible for his introduction to several men and women whom he had been desirous of knowing. He appeared at intervals in Tite Street on Sunday afternoons, though more particularly as his host's friend, and occupied himself with the double task of making the acquaintance of any fresh interesting people there might be, and of removing Mrs. Sheridan's dislike of himself. That was not unknown to him, but he did not mind very much ; into the husband he had instilled a sense of his own integrity and sound common-sense eminently satisfactory to that gentleman, and he felt that that was enough. At the entrance of Mr. Sheridan himself he rose from his manuscript-laden desk and shook hands cordially.

' Ah ! Mr. Sheridan,' said he ; ' I am glad you have put in an early appearance. I have asked no one else to luncheon, so we shall be able to have a talk together. And are Mrs. Sheridan and the young lady well ? I trust so. Sit down, Mr. Sheridan—sit down in front of the fire. You are not interrupting me. My work for the morning is over—an article for the *Fortnightly*'—he laughed a little—' in answer to Canon Moran. You read his article ?'

Mr. Sheridan had to admit that he had not seen the Canon's article.

'Well, well, scholarly, no doubt, but—what shall we say?—hardly convincing. So many put their pens to paper, you know, dear Mr. Sheridan, for the sake of writing. Such a mistake—such a great mistake!' He knew of Mr. Sheridan's literary efforts, for which he had always a guarded praise, but his remark had no personal bearing save to the Canon himself.

'I am glad,' began Mr. Sheridan, feeling that it would be best to plunge *in medias res*, 'that we are to be alone. To tell you the truth, I am sorely worried.'

The Bishop's face assumed a look of the deepest sympathy. 'Anything in which I can help?' he inquired, expecting some wavering over a small point of dogma.

'I hope you can,' replied Mr. Sheridan, toying with the fringe round the arm of his chair—'I hope you can. I am having a little worry at home.' He broke off for a moment. 'The bringing up of one's children, as I am sure you will agree with me, is at all times a difficult one.' He looked at the Bishop, who was nodding pleasantly. 'I am in favour, of course, of allowing children a reasonable amount of freedom, but there is a limit to all things.'

The Bishop heartily endorsed this opinion. He leant forward in his chair. He had long ago understood that a barrier of some magnitude separated Mr. Sheridan from the other members of his family, and it seemed now that there was a possibility of hearing some communication of an interesting nature. 'Tell me everything, Mr. Sheridan,' said he; 'you know I will do what I can, but you must tell me everything.'

'Until a day or two ago I thought it was nothing,'

said Mr. Sheridan by way of preface ; ' now I am convinced that it is my duty to take some steps in the matter.'

' And what exactly is the matter ?'

' You know a great many people, Bishop, do you not ? I wonder if you have ever met a young man by the name of Cedric Readham ?'

' Readham ? Is he one of the Loughtons ? I know Lord Loughton slightly. His wife is well meaning, but a trifle curious—yes, a little curious. I met her in Mentone. Their son is in Paris, I think. Stanley is his name, I rather fancy. One knows so many people that it is easy to make mistakes. But Cedric, you say ? Let me see—a nephew, perhaps ? There was a nephew at Cambridge. Yes, he would be about twenty-five now.' The Bishop turned his eyes away from Mr. Sheridan and looked at the pattern on the carpet. He was trying to remember in what way the name of Readham was familiar.

' That is the man, I expect,' said Mr. Sheridan.

The Bishop was smiling. His cheeks resembled an apple that had been severed and had its two halves plastered down on either side of a very broad nose. His eyes disappeared behind horizontal folds. Then suddenly all trace of merriment vanished. He had remembered other things, and Mr. Sheridan was consulting him upon a matter that was more or less professional.

' Yes,' said he ; ' I have never met him, but I have heard of him.'

' Ah !' murmured Mr. Sheridan inquiringly.

The Bishop shot a glance at his visitor, and decided to learn what the trouble was before disburdening himself further.

‘He has lately been brought to our house,’ continued Mr. Sheridan. ‘A friend of ours, Manning—I think you have met him—introduced him, and my wife and daughter have taken to him in quite a surprising manner. Personally I was never very much prepossessed in his favour, but it is only lately that I have succeeded in bringing to light two unfortunate facts.’

‘And they are—?’

‘In the first place, Ruth is exceedingly frivolous, and has, as I have told you before, been in the habit of making friends with a number of young people of both sexes, not, apparently, seeing to what danger she is running; and, in the second, I am sorry to say that this young man Readham is anything but what could be desired.’

The Bishop with difficulty preserved a grave countenance.

‘In what way, Mr. Sheridan?’ he inquired.

‘Unfortunately, he is one of those misguided young people who allow themselves to leave the recognised track and go off at a tangent. I mean, that he is so totally lost to all Christian feelings that in my daughter’s presence he ventured—well, to put it bluntly, to contradict flatly one of the main points of our religion. It would be useless, I feel sure, for me to attempt to teach him the error of his ways. My words, my tracts, anything I could do, would be wasted upon him. I do not like the man myself, and, in short, I do not want him in my house.’

‘There has been nothing of . . . no hint at . . .?’ The Bishop paused diplomatically.

‘Ruth is only a child,’ replied Mr. Sheridan quickly.

‘No; so far as I know, there has been nothing of that nature, but Readham is the very man who would be

base enough to suggest something of the kind. And yet, now that I come to think of it, he has favoured me with some preposterous views on the subject of marriage. Now, I particularly do not wish to have any unpleasantness in the house, but something must be done.'

'Of course,' agreed the Bishop, 'something must be done. It is odd,' he continued, 'that you should mention Readham's name to me. I remember something about him. As a Fellow of Trinity, I manage to hear about much that goes on. We Fellows, you know, hear very much more than undergraduates give us credit for. There was at one time likelihood of some trouble arising out of a young men's club called the "Openhearts." Readham was, I remember, a prominent member.'

'The "Openhearts"?' What was that?'

The Bishop shrugged his shoulders. It was hard to explain matters of that sort to Mr. Sheridan, and he was doubtful how far diplomacy required him to go in the matter of affording his guest such information as he possessed about Readham. There was also Mrs. Sheridan to be considered, and from the fact that she had evidently a liking for the man, he was inclined to think that he was listening to a rather exaggerated account of someone who, like so many others, including himself, did not agree with the various ideas which filled Mr. Sheridan's brain. 'Some men,' said he, 'on going to the University, seem to find that after the perhaps severe limits of school discipline—sometimes they are perhaps severe, you know—something of an opposite nature is necessary. So you get societies formed. Such a one was the "Openhearts." I believe they started well, but in a little while the whole

just to all our fellow-creatures. Justice and righteousness, you know . . . ' He smiled in lieu of finishing his sentence, and Mr. Sheridan understood perfectly.

And when the prelate accompanied his guest to the episcopal threshold, and uttered a kind of secular blessing upon his head, Mr. Sheridan felt strengthened in body and soul. He stepped on to the pavement with a briskness of manner that surprised even the Bishop.

CHAPTER X

THE CRUSADE IS CONTINUED

THE Reverend John Barnett could not but notice that Miss Sheridan's interest in his company had sensibly diminished since the appearance of his old colleague in Chelsea. But being of the opinion that, in spite of numerous excellent traits in her character, there was much of the butterfly in Ruth, he had not altogether been surprised. He liked no one better as a companion, and had even gone so far as to ask himself on more than one occasion whether he should demand the lady's hand in marriage. In this way he hoped to bring her into closer contact with the Church, and to cause that flightier side of her nature to disappear for ever. Mr. Barnett was not in love; his nature hardly allowed of that. He would marry, of course, because a bachelor cleric was an anachronism, but to him a wife meant nothing more than an agreeable companion who would not scruple to give as much time as her husband might demand to his affairs. In the Church and on the field his enthusiasm was unbounded; in all other places, save, indeed, in Tite Street, he seemed to lack those qualities which collectively go to make what is generally described as a charming personality. With Ruth, on the other hand, he had allowed the cleric to become merged to a

great extent in the athlete. Mr. Sheridan found in him a warm supporter in all his undertakings, and realized that the new curate, whatever his faults might be, was no hypocrite.

At the University his career had been a successful one. He had been President of the Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, and had represented the University at Queen's Club on more than one occasion. From infancy he had moved in what Ruth was pleased to call a churchy atmosphere, and as early as his fifteenth year had fully satisfied himself that his career lay in the Church. He had not in the least understood the precepts of the 'Openhearts,' but it had been made clear to him that they constituted a body antagonistic to the Church, and for that reason he had not hesitated to use his utmost influence to suppress them. Readham in particular had been pointed out to him as the chief malefactor, and now that Ruth showed signs of receiving him into her confidence, Mr. Barnett felt that some measures ought to be taken to prevent such a woful circumstance. But it was so obviously none of his business that he had perforce to remain silent, and wait patiently until the time when Ruth would see the true character of her new friend, and summon himself back to his old position. Then, he mused, he might broach the subject of marriage to Mr. Sheridan. Still, it was provoking that the one man whom he had regarded as an enemy at Cambridge should once again cross his path, and prove, even though it might be for only a short time, so very successful.

He was thinking of these things in his lodgings when his landlady announced Mr. Sheridan.

'You are surprised to see me, Barnett,' began Mr. Sheridan, shaking hands; 'I hope I am not interrupting

you in your work, but I have come to see you on a matter of importance.' He sat down on a chair, and drew off his gloves. The clergyman watched him almost nervously.

'What do you know precisely,' said Mr. Sheridan, 'of the "Openhearts" ?'

'The "Openhearts" ?' repeated Barnett in astonishment.

'The "Openhearts,"' said Mr. Sheridan calmly. 'I want you to tell me all you knew of their detestable society while you were at college.'

'I certainly knew something about them,' replied the clergyman, trying to understand how Mr. Sheridan had come to hear of their existence. It was hardly likely, he thought, that Readham would mention them to anyone. No one would mention them to Mr. Sheridan, except, perhaps, Manning, who might with his usual denseness have introduced the subject.

'Of course—of course ; and you were no doubt disgusted by their atheistic demonstrations and general depravity ?'

'To an extent. . . .'

'Very well, then. You knew Readham was a member ?'

'I did.' Barnett almost gasped the words out.

'He was, I expect, their leader.'

'That's about it, Mr. Sheridan.'

'Ah, well, the long and the short of it is, Barnett, that I am not going to have the man in my house. He is exerting a bad influence over Ruth, and he will probably attempt to inculcate in her mind the most heinous doctrines. I shall convey a hint to Manning, and hope that we shall have seen the last of his friend. Manning I like—he is essentially an honourable man—

but I cannot trust Readham. Yesterday, I regret to say, he used such words to me in my own drawing-room that I was obliged to leave the room to prevent a scene. And there is another thing, Barnett; I have noticed that since he has been coming to our house you have visited us less often than usual. I am sorry for that, but I think you might have warned us. Well, well,' he continued, seeing the other's look of astonishment, 'perhaps you could not do that. At all events, I am quite sure that I am doing the right thing. I have no doubt that Mrs. Sheridan and Ruth will not take the matter quite in the spirit I could have wished for, but I shall look to you to help me. I want to be quite fair to the man, so I shall ask you if you have anything to say in his favour. Do you think he is a proper person to be with Ruth ?'

'No,' said the clergyman slowly; 'a man who can write the books he has written is hardly the man to be with Ruth. She is such an impressionable girl.'

'The books he has written ?' queried Mr. Sheridan. 'Has he written books, then ? I did not know that.' This discovery might possibly put a new face upon the matter.

'Novels,' said Barnett. 'I thought perhaps you knew about them.'

'How should I ?' rejoined the other somewhat testily. 'I only learnt of the "Openhearts" to-day from the Bishop of Bayswater.'

'The Bishop of Bayswater ?'

'He told me about the society, and had, in fact, heard of Readham's name in connection with it. Now, what are these novels ?'

A definition involving such expressions as 'a sad

morbidity' and 'distorted imagination' was given. Now that his unspoken wishes were to be turned into realities by the sudden appearance of Mr. Sheridan, Barnett was not altogether prepared to give that gentleman all the particulars at his disposal. A full account of all those facts which might so easily be twisted into accusations seemed now perilously near to an attack from behind. It was one thing to revolve in one's mind the whole array of facts which would tend to increase Mr. Sheridan's distrust of this usurper—so he regarded him—and another to put them into Mr. Sheridan's possession. For all he knew, Readham might have put away all those unfortunate ideas, and at the present moment be as useful a citizen as he considered himself to be. He remembered, too, that they had both played on the same side a score of times on the football field ; that in itself was enough to demand some kind of loyalty.

'I will see the books,' said Mr. Sheridan in a martyr's voice. 'I expect I shall learn all I want from them. What are their titles ?'

'I shouldn't read them,' faltered Barnett. 'They are merely products of an immature and rather disordered brain.'

'My dear sir,' retorted Mr. Sheridan, 'how do I know that he hasn't already shown them to Ruth ? Most of us have a more or less natural desire to show our work to friends. I speak from experience.' Mr. Sheridan's tracts were sent in peculiarly-shaped envelopes with surprising regularity to all his own friends and a good number of his family's. 'Now I must really ask you to give me the titles.'

'He writes under a pseudonym,' began the clergyman.

‘Tut, tut, I could have expected that, but I want the titles. You haven’t them here by any chance?’

‘Oh no,’ Barnett laughed uneasily. ‘They are hardly the books I should read for choice.’ He looked hard at Mr. Sheridan and thought of Ruth. His duty seemed clear. He must help Mr. Sheridan at all costs. ‘One was called *The World’s Woman*,’ he said, ‘another *God the Jester*; I have forgotten the third.’

Mr. Sheridan’s face exhibited obvious signs of the shock which these words had given him. There was an element of something like hoarseness in his voice as he proceeded to tell the curate that he had expected something of the sort. He was only glad, he said, that he now knew the worst.

‘I should say that we have had a narrow escape,’ said he. ‘Even now I do not know to what extent he may have poisoned Ruth’s mind. Barnett, I am afraid we can do nothing for Readham, but we must look to ourselves. The titles of those books are enough to show me what kind of productions they are. I do not want to hear more. I shall interview Manning at the earliest opportunity. Now don’t let me keep you from your work any longer.’

He said good-bye, and left the astonished curate standing motionless in the middle of the room.

Now, when a man undertakes a crusade, it may be supposed that he does so in the expectation of deriving holy joy as well from the means to the end as from the end itself. Mr. Sheridan was determined that his crusade in the end should meet with the success which he felt it must surely deserve, but now that success seemed assured, he had no intention of allowing the campaign to be brought to a close before it was absolutely necessary. Having taken a holiday Mr. Sheridan

felt that it was incumbent upon him to call on all those fellow-parishioners who, he knew, would side with him in the Readham matter, and let them see that in cases of this sort he was at once firm as the proverbial rock, and fair as the Goddess of Justice herself. He had still several hours in front of him before a return to Tite Street was necessary. He was 'going to be quite determined with the family,' but he recognised that some diplomacy would be needed. His wife and daughter might prove a little difficult. In the mean time, he considered, each fresh visit would do something to make his position one of greater strength. And so Mr. Sheridan called upon no fewer than three churchwardens, one vendor of religious books and pamphlets, and a blind lady who, having buried three husbands, had turned over a new leaf, and become religious enthusiast, and by six o'clock the master of 138 Tite Street once again stood on his own doorstep. The Crusader had returned. Everything had been accomplished, save, unfortunately, the drawing up of the terms of peace. It must be admitted that Mr. Sheridan walked upstairs a little anxious in spirit. There had been times when Ruth had failed to see things in a proper light, even when innumerable, and to him unanswerable, arguments had been advanced to a degree that had taxed his brain to its utmost capacity.

In the drawing-room sat his wife reading an art magazine.

'Well, dear, did you enjoy your holiday?'

'In a way I did,' responded Mr. Sheridan, 'in a way I did not.'

'The Bishop well?' Mrs. Sheridan scented trouble, but determined to put it off as long as possible.

‘Quite,’ said Mr. Sheridan laconically. ‘Where is Ruth?’

‘Out, dear, with Blanche Manning.’

Mr. Sheridan uttered a little gasp; it would be difficult to say of triumph or dismay.

‘She ought to be in by now,’ he said as calmly as he could.

‘She’s dining at Sloane Street.’

At that piece of intelligence Mr. Sheridan could not restrain a snort. He wished that the Bishop of Bayswater, Barnett, the three churchwardens, the vendor of tracts, and the blind lady could have been standing in his drawing-room at that moment. He was about to pour forth a torrent of abuse, and take his wife fully into confidence, when Mrs. Sheridan, putting down her magazine, announced another mishap to the dromedary.

It must not be supposed that Mr. Sheridan regarded the estimable dromedary and his daughter as of equal importance, but for the moment his attention was wholly taken up with the details of this fresh catastrophe, and in a few minutes he was on his way to the kitchen with the object of having an interview with the parlourmaid. This over, in no way to his satisfaction, he once again mounted the stairs, determined to spring upon his wife without further delay the results of the campaign. But Mrs. Sheridan had retired to her dressing-room, and as her husband made his way to the second landing his eyes caught sight of the door of Ruth’s room; it was slightly ajar. Something prompted him to walk inside. He switched on the light and looked round him. Truly a preposterous room for a daughter of his! He espied a table in a corner with some books on it. He marched across and

took up one of them. It was bound in a sober grey, and bore the title, printed in thick black letters, *God the Jester*.

Had others been present in the room they would have said that Mr. Sheridan bubbled with rage. It would be difficult to describe exactly what did happen. Mr. Sheridan hurled the book to the floor, and then picked it up again. He looked inside, and was almost disappointed to find no words written across the title-page. Once again the book was thrown down, and the outraged father—so he considered himself—picked up *The World's Woman*. He uttered fierce exclamations which no doubt satisfied him, though they would not have been intelligible to anyone else. This second book was treated to the same unceremonious treatment as had been meted out to *God the Jester*, and Mr. Sheridan glanced at the third. Here the title consisted of a man's name, and afforded no clue to the nature of the contents. With lips pressed firmly together he opened the volume and began to read, but only for a few seconds. Then with the veins showing dark on his forehead he put down the book and hurried from the room. To think that his daughter had read stuff of that kind! The thought was unbearable. Truth to tell, Mr. Sheridan could hardly have alighted upon a passage that better bore out his preconceived notions of Readham's writings. His book—it was the first he had published—opened with the following paragraph.

'There is as much fashion in so-called sin as in dress itself. It is of the world's unfashionable sins that this book treats. Let us have Truth if we are to have anything at all. Let Truth give what teaching she

will. Away with false modesty, away with your hypocrites ! Let us see Life, and be not afraid. Do we write of Sin ? Who can say, for who is to give us a definition of Sin ? Put aside your cloaks, ye frail people, and stand bared to the world and its ways.'

Ruth did not put in an appearance that evening until close upon eleven o'clock. She found her father sitting in a peculiarly uncomfortable position in front of the dining-room fire.

'Good-evening, father.'

Mr. Sheridan looked at her with an expression which Ruth afterwards described as 'intended to imply that I was no daughter of his.' 'I went up to your room to-night,' said he, 'and on the table found objectionable literature.'

Ruth stared at him. She knew well enough to what he alluded, but although she herself might have agreed with him at any other time on the nature of their contents, nothing now would have induced her to have aught but praise for anything to which her father might show the least objection. After the pleasantly passing hours she had spent, it was worse than annoying to come home and find one's parent in one of his grumpiest moods. She temporized:

'Which ?'

'Three books.'

'French ?'

'No,' said Mr. Sheridan, 'I refer to three English novels.'

'The novels of Mr. Denmian ?'

'The novels of Mr. Readham.' Mr. Sheridan spoke with extreme gravity. 'I am most pained, Ruth, that any man who has come to our house should be so

utterly without sense of honour that he should give you books of that description.'

'He did nothing of the sort,' retorted Ruth with some heat.

'Then how dare you buy that kind of stuff?' demanded her father angrily. It was nothing to him that Readham had not countenanced the appearance of his works in Ruth's room.

For a moment Ruth was on the point of allowing her temper to get the better of her, but she checked herself in time, and observed sarcastically that it was merely a matter of opinion. Some people considered such things objectionable, others might think just the reverse. Seeing her father's look of contempt she was goaded into adding: 'And as for that, I have heard a good many people say that they know of no more objectionable literature than your own tracts!' With which Parthian shot she bounced out of the room, leaving the Crusader speechless, utterly unable to deliver the carefully prepared lecture which had taken him the whole evening to concoct.

CHAPTER XI

SERIOUSLY AFFECTING TOM MANNING

'I ALWAYS think,' observed Mrs. Manning at table, 'that Tom's breakfasts ought to be his only meal in the day.'

'Poor fellow !' said Cedric, buttering his toast, 'but I never knew you were a food reformer, Mrs. Manning.'

'Only where Tom is concerned. You see, he . . . he gulps so.'

Tom laughed happily. It was pleasant to be teased by his wife in front of Cedric ; he felt that any such display might help to show his friend what delights in the future were to be his lot. 'A large meal now,' he exclaimed, 'makes you fit for the day's work. What business do you suppose I could do in the City if I didn't arrive there—well—not hungry ?'

Both Blanche and Cedric laughed. They were aware of the true significance of Tom's visits to the City. It was an old joke that the daily sojourn at the office, however important it might appear to him, was in effect nothing more than an agreeable farce, which if it at times tended to keep the clerks from their business, at others certainly provided a very welcome form of entertainment. He had a large income of his own, and had no need to bother himself about financial matters, but as he had come to regard his own presence

in the office as essential to the well-being of the firm in which he was what might have been called an 'occasional partner,' he regularly put in an appearance at some hour in the morning, cheerfully bullied the clerks, read the financial papers, sat at his desk for a few hours, smoked two or three pipes, and departed with a comfortable feeling of having done his duty. 'Every man should have some task to perform,' honest Tom was wont to say with that delightfully naïve air of his, which from experience one could tell was meant to imply the actual publication of a new and wonderful doctrine, 'and if some people have a heavier load on their shoulders than others, well, it can't be helped.' He added the latter half of the sentence in order to impress his audience with the stupendous dimensions of his own load. Not that he was in any way a humbug; Tom invariably believed what he said, and in the office he saw no reasons to doubt the atlas-like nature of his task. It was the knowledge of these facts that made his wife and friend laugh at him now.

'Well, to change the subject, what about to-day?' asked Mrs. Manning. 'Is anything arranged? Oh, of course; how stupid of me! To-night we go with Mrs. Sheridan and Ruth to the theatre. I was actually forgetting it.'

'Jolly clever piece, I hear,' remarked Tom, nodding his head once or twice, whilst his eyebrows were brought close together. 'Think you'll like it, Cedric.' The full significance of the fact that Ruth was to accompany them burst upon him. 'Sure you will,' he added, and looked at Blanche.

Cedric's eyes were on his plate, and his thoughts were far away. A letter had come from the old

Dowager that morning, full of the usual dear motherly questions, little pieces of home news, quotations from Aunt Janet's latest epistle, and so forth. Was he going to desert her for good and all? Had she seen the last of her quiet, peaceful nephew? Or had he, perhaps, turned into the spoilt young man whom Thackeray loved so much to portray? Chipton was still so strange, she wrote, without him. Cedric smiled now to himself as he thought of the dear old lady patiently going her rounds, looking after the pets, journeying to the home-farm, sitting peaceably at her desk, with Mr. Montague Titmarsh or the genial Boz with whom to while away the hours. What a difference there was between the life at Chipton and the life here in London! But he was happier now, even though there was no longer that tranquillity which he had found so soothing at Chipton.

'Thinking, as usual!' Tom turned to him.

'I heard from my aunt this morning,' said Cedric apologetically. 'My thoughts were at Chipton. She considers my stay with you disgracefully long.'

'She evidently wants you back again,' remarked Blanche.

'She'll have to want, I'm afraid,' cried Tom. Cedric was slow at even nibbling at his tempting bait, but then he was very clever, and Tom had long ago come to the conclusion that very clever people were in nine cases out of ten also very odd.

'We've all had letters this morning,' Mrs. Manning went on. 'It's rather rare for Tom to receive more than a postcard. You see, he doesn't write many letters himself, and most of his friends don't seem to have much to say. My poor Tom is no scribe.'

'Of course I have letters,' announced Tom. 'But

one should always wire, if possible. That teaches one to be pithy and concise.' He looked at his wife for some sign of approbation, and was greeted with a smile. 'I don't like receiving letters either,' he continued. He looked at the unopened envelope at his side. 'Business,' he explained. 'Don't know the writing. You see, Cedric, they even invade your private address ; it's bad enough to have your City desk filled with them, but . . .'

'That, of course, is the worst of being a City man,' interrupted Cedric. He turned to Mrs. Manning. 'Don't you think I ought to go to Chipton and look after the dear old lady ?'

Mrs. Manning looked into his eyes, as though she expected to be able to see through them into his brain. Was he only a philanderer, a mere player in a none too pleasant game, that he could withstand—as was apparently the case—the united onslaught that was being made upon him ? Was he really fond of Ruth, or was she no more than a pleasant companion to him ? She had never made up her mind on the point. Cedric seemed to hug a mystery. In all the weeks of his stay in Sloane Street she had practically learnt nothing about him, yet he had embraced all their little plans with something like avidity. Was he merely bashful or uncertain ? She looked across at her husband, but Tom was opening his letter.

'Of course, if you want to leave everyone here, Mr. Readham—' she began.

Cedric was about to utter some conventional phrase when he was interrupted by a loud peal of laughter from Tom, who had suddenly been seized with a fit of merriment that threatened to overturn him.

'My dear Tom !'

Her husband endeavoured to make some explanation, but choked in the attempt. Tears coursed down his cheeks, his eyes disappeared into his head, his huge body vibrated, the table began to shake. Mrs. Manning became alarmed, and suggested drastic measures, whereat Tom's face renewed its normal shape and appearance with marked celerity. He tendered another apology.

'Oh, don't apologize,' said Cedric, laughing; 'I always like to see a man really happy.'

'Of course, Blanche dear, it's business. I mean—you understand what I mean, don't you?'

'I don't understand how I am to know the joke until I have seen the letter. Tom, hand it over to me.'

Tom shook his head roguishly. 'Not yet,' said he. 'I told you it was only a business letter. It doesn't concern you.' And he roared again. It certainly was not her concern, he thought. He regarded it as the first official recognition of his work, being as it was a note from Mr. Sheridan marked 'private and confidential,' the words underlined twice, with a request that Mr. Manning would come round to Tite Street as early as he could manage with convenience that day, in order to discuss a matter of grave importance. It was, he thought, as clear as daylight. A new ally had all unexpectedly appeared over the horizon. It was the funniest thing possible. Without satisfying the very natural curiosity which both his wife and Cedric manifested, he excused himself as soon as he could, waited a moment in his study to light a pipe, and then, with coat and hat hurriedly donned, came back to his wife to bid her good-bye.

'Important business,' he pleaded, 'or I would never

dream of leaving you at this unearthly hour. You know what I mean ?' He beamed pleasantly.

'I ?' exclaimed his wife in astonishment. 'How on earth should I know anything about your business ? Mr. Readham, is my poor boy getting ready for a lunatic asylum ?'

For answer her husband playfully patted Blanche's cheek, pressed hurried though none the less affectionate kisses upon her lips, nodded in staccato fashion, and rushed from the house.

A hansom was hailed, and he was driven to Tite Street. During the first part of the drive he laughed immoderately. An ally in Mr. Sheridan ! It was nothing short of a miracle. He was glad that he had not told his wife anything yet. It would be so much more gratifying to tell her when he had actually spoken to old Sheridan himself, and learnt the reasons for the sudden change in that gentleman's tactics. Tom, indeed, had not failed to notice Mr. Sheridan's demeanour towards Cedric ; hitherto, he knew, it had savoured merely of cold politeness ; now, however, he had come round to his own point of view, and had, apparently, at last succeeded in reading Cedric's character aright.

'Of course, the old fool couldn't mean anything else,' he thought to himself. The unwelcome idea that he might have read a wrong meaning into Mr. Sheridan's letter suddenly came to mind, and his good spirits showed signs of diminishing. He re-read the letter, and wondered whether it did hint, after all, at any great change in Mr. Sheridan's opinions. He noticed now for the first time the epithet in front of 'importance.' 'Grave' began to have a sinister look about it. 'Oh, it's all rot about the wisdom of second

thoughts,' he told himself. 'He can't be such a fool as not to see that Readham is the best match that Ruth could possibly make.' But, notwithstanding this reflection, he arrived at Tite Street considerably sobered and a little apprehensive.

He was shown into the dining-room. Until this moment he had never realized how different this room was from the others. Whilst he was waiting, the absurd idea that he was once again the schoolboy, preparing himself as best he could for an interview with the headmaster, occurred to him, and would not be banished. He found himself biting his lip through sheer nervousness, and yet a little time ago he had been laughing over the idea of Mr. Sheridan as an ally. The dining-room seemed now to be reflecting Mr. Sheridan as some ogre-like person. It had never before appeared so like a schoolmaster's study. Its scrupulous neatness appalled him. He almost expected to hear sounds of other boys playing, and then in the midst of laughing at himself he looked round to see if he could imagine where the green-baize-covered door would have been, the fateful barrier which separated the boys' part of the house from the private side. It was all too provoking, more especially when, on the entrance of Mr. Sheridan, none of these ideas vanished.

Mr. Sheridan shut the door and shook hands.

'I am glad you were able to come round,' he said. 'We shall have to have a little talk. Come and sit by the fire. Have a cigar?'

Tom accepted a cigar, more, perhaps, to dispel the schoolboy illusion than with any view of enjoying the smoke.

'My letter, Manning, concerned your friend Readham.'

'Ah ! I gathered as much.'

'I shall not beat about the bush,' continued the twentieth-century Crusader ; 'but the fact of the matter is that I do not want your friend here again. I must go further, and tell you that I do not desire my family to see him again.'

Tom was dumb. So the second thoughts had been right, and any ideas of Mr. Sheridan as an ally utterly ludicrous. His laughter at breakfast had suddenly become inexplicable. For the first time since school-days Tom was not disposed towards his usual cheerful sureness about things.

'It is a very difficult matter,' continued Mr. Sheridan ; 'but I cannot forget that you introduced him to our house, and, in order to save any unpleasantness'—this, be it owned, was one of the Crusader's most desired ends—'I have asked you to come here and talk it over.'

'It is most extraordinary,' poor Tom managed to blurt out.

Mr. Sheridan made a wave of the hand. 'I think you should have warned me,' he went on, 'that your friend was the writer of books which no—er—clean-minded person would care to read. At any rate, they are utterly lacking in all morality, and are deadly poisonous. I am sorry to say my daughter has got hold of them, and I cannot pretend to gauge the amount of harm they may have done her. They breathe out impiety. You have read them, I suppose ?'

'Yes.'

'They are hardly pleasant, are they ?' demanded Mr. Sheridan with a sneer.

'Depends what you call pleasant,' said the wretched Tom, with visions of failure before him. 'Personally,

I could never understand what he was driving at. I dare say we neither of us understand them ; Readham's so dam—er—so clever. Besides, what a man writes when he's young and what he writes when he's older needn't be the same thing. Readham always told me that he had to write those books.' He looked at the other very hard. 'Very few people know who wrote them. Did he tell you they were his ?'

'Is that likely ?' Mr. Sheridan spoke with some scorn. 'Naturally he did not want anyone to learn who the author was ; to say the least of it, he was only politic to write under an assumed name.'

'Then why bother about the books at all ?' asked Tom, certainly calmer, though he spoke almost at random.

'Because a man who can write those books is no friend for Ruth,' cried the Crusader hotly.

A little anger mixed itself with Tom's helplessness.

'She is no longer a child who doesn't know her own mind,' he remarked bluntly. Ruth, he remembered, had her hair up.

'She is,' Mr. Sheridan almost shouted. 'Now, I am striving to be fair, but I must say I think it was your duty to have told me about the books.'

Tom reddened. 'Do you accuse me of underhand conduct ?' he asked angrily.

'No,' said Mr. Sheridan smoothly, 'certainly not, but I think if you had given a thought to the matter you could not have failed to hesitate before bringing Readham to the house.'

The schoolroom atmosphere vanished with startling rapidity.

'I'm damned if I see that,' shouted Tom. 'If I can have Readham a guest in my house, and let him sit

at my table with my own wife, I can certainly take him with me to any house where I am welcome without having to ask myself whether I ought to or not. Such an idea is absurd. I am surprised to hear you speak like that, Mr. Sheridan'—he raised his voice to football-field pitch—'very surprised indeed. It is a downright accusal of underhandedness, and as such I er—dam well resent it exceedingly.'

Mr. Sheridan, to do him justice, behaved as he imagined a crusader, involved in a similarly painful position, would have done; he did not quail—Tom's attitude was decidedly bellicose—he merely allowed the smile of tolerance to play about his features, and observed that Mrs. Manning was a married lady, his own daughter a girl. He was not accusing Manning of anything save a little lack of foresight, nor did he want to pain him more than was absolutely necessary for his own peace of mind.

Tom could have cried with vexation. To think that all his carefully thought out plans should be knocked on the head by a bigoted old father! Cheerfully would he have attacked the Crusader then and there. He rather regretted the code which his class generally observed in such a matter as this. He could have envied the opportunity of the coster, both in regard to choice of language at his disposal and honest exercise of the fist.

'I have not spoken to Mrs. Sheridan or Ruth yet,' continued Mr. Sheridan, 'and, as I said before, I am desirous of preventing any unpleasantness, so I shall take my family into the country for a little time, and ask you to be so kind as to intimate to Readham my regrets at being unable to extend my hospitality to him further.'

'You put me in a deucedly awkward position,' said Tom. 'If Readham is not a welcome guest, neither Mrs. Manning nor——'

'I am surely permitted to have a word to say about those who come to my house,' interrupted Mr. Sheridan suavely. 'I am willing, if you like, to recognise the fact that I have been unfortunate enough to come across only the undesirable side of your friend's character. My wife and Mrs. Manning are old friends. I do not desire this to make any difference to their friendship.'

'Why, of course it must,' exclaimed Tom.

'I hope not,' returned Mr. Sheridan. 'I am only one of many.' He spoke deprecatingly.

'And what about to-night?' asked Tom.

'To-night?' queried Mr. Sheridan.

'Mrs. Sheridan and Ruth were to have come to the theatre with us.'

Mr. Sheridan had not yet heard of this proposal. He was silent for a few moments. Then, remembering that both the Mannings and his own wife were to be included in the party, he decided to extend to it his own gracious permission. 'Let nothing be said or done till to-morrow, then,' he said, feeling that such magnanimity could not go unrewarded. 'To-morrow my wife and daughter can go into the country, and there need be no unpleasantness whatever.'

Tom gave it as his opinion that there would of necessity be a great deal of unpleasantness, but he was forced to see that it would be better to wait until the morrow before taking any steps in the matter. He had not the least notion of what course to adopt. He listened to Mr. Sheridan's closing words without understanding their import in the least, and he left the house without noticing Mr. Sheridan's outstretched

hand. His mind was chaotic. Ideas refused to shape themselves before him, but it seemed somehow that he was once again enveloped in that amazing maelstrom in which he had found himself after hearing for the first time that Blanche returned his affection. The only difference was that then the effect upon him had been magnificent, now it was miserably disheartening.

He drove straight to the City, and surprised his partners by repeated demands for a form of refreshment not usually indulged in at the office at so early an hour. He refused to show the smallest interest in the altogether unexpected rise in the price of some shares which he had purchased but a few weeks before. On a clerk venturing to ask for his signature he was told to go to the deuce. For a considerable time Tom sat at his desk pen in hand, paper in front of him; he was trying to indite a letter, though had anyone asked to whom he proposed to write he would not have been able, even had he so desired, which was extremely improbable, to offer the least information upon the subject. He began at last to draw very crude and inartistic representations of the heads of young ladies. Tiring of that, he turned his attention to the depicting of individuals of the male sex, more or less clerical in appearance, and succeeded in drawing a figure leaning over two horizontal lines, which were meant to suggest a pulpit. And then as he surveyed this work of art he uttered an exclamation.

'Barnett, or I'm damned!' He added a word or two which he considered applicable to the occasion. Of course it was Barnett who had told Sheridan about the authorship of those confounded books. Tom saw the whole conspiracy. Jealousy, underhandedness, bigotry, a thousand other unpleasant qualities—all had

come to light. 'I might have known,' he told himself; 'old enemies, of course!' He tore his drawing into pieces, swore softly to himself, and dashed out of the office. Clerks raised their eyes from ledgers to gaze at him, and turned back quickly to hide their looks of amusement. A murmur of 'tantrums' might have been heard from one corner, but Tom noted nothing. He walked out into the street, and in two minutes was standing in front of a bar ordering a large quantity of whisky.

He ultimately arrived at his house some few minutes before four o'clock in the afternoon, and went straight to his study. Blanche and Cedric, who were sitting upstairs, heard the bang of the door, and looked at one another.

'What's the matter now, I wonder?' said Blanche. 'I recognise that bang.'

'Shall I go and see?'

'Oh no, it's much better to take no notice of him when he is like that. I never do.'

'But he was choking with laughter at breakfast, evidently very pleased with himself.'

'He is a perfectly absurd creature,' rejoined Blanche calmly. 'Let him work off his fit. It's much the best plan. He'll be all right to-night at the theatre. I am going to put on a new dress. I hope we shall be able to squeeze into the box. It is not very large, if I remember rightly.'

Cedric smiled.

Suddenly a noise of chairs being moved without much thought for their welfare fell on their ears.

'I'd better go,' said Cedric.

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. 'When you know him as well as I do you won't want to bother yourself

about trifles of that sort. He is a very dear boy, but he is a very stupid boy. I expect I have offended him in some way. I am always doing that, you know. It's such a nuisance sometimes. He is so foolish about little things.'

'Sometimes I think I'm foolish about little things,' said Cedric. 'Little things after all have a great deal to do with our lives. Hullo, something is up!' He went downstairs. Opening the study door he saw Tom addressing the reading-lamp, and eyeing it ferociously. Two chairs lay on their sides; the tobacco-jar emptied of its contents looked up mockingly from the floor; its lid had rolled to the fender.

'My dear fellow!'

Tom forced a laugh. 'Hullo,' he said, 'I've just upset these confounded things.'

'So it seems, old chap. Anything up?'

'Er—City worries, Cedric.' He took in a large breath, puffed it out again, and tried to appear at his ease. 'Things are so devilishly bad now, you know.'

'You said they were better yesterday.'

'Oh! . . . America,' murmured Tom very awkwardly.

'They do things so quickly there.'

'I had heard so. Well, aren't you coming up?'

'Of course. Is Blanche upstairs?'

'Yes.'

'I say, old fellow'—Tom turned to his friend with a beseeching look on his face—'you might do me a favour, will you?'

'Yes, out with it.'

'To tell you the truth, old man, I don't want to go to the theatre to-night. I want—I—er—want, of course, to work. You might back me up with Blanche, will you? You see, she would be cut up naturally,

but I don't want to go.' The spectacle of Tom and the beheaded tobacco-jar was quite a piteous one. Cedric stared.

'All right, Tom,' said he. 'Don't you worry yourself. You come along upstairs.'

Tom greeted his wife with a sickly smile on his face.

'Why, my dear, you look perfectly sheepish,' she said.

Somewhat helpless, the aggrieved husband looked towards his friend.

'Those beastly American bonds, you know, Mrs. Manning,' said Cedric dutifully. 'The poor chap has been worried to death in the City.' He turned to Tom. 'D'you know, if I were you I wouldn't come to the theatre to-night. You look done up. Have a quiet read, and let me look after the ladies.'

Tom bestowed upon him the grateful look of a dumb animal for his master at a time when food is about to be administered. Though he was entirely in the dark, and not a little curious over Tom's strange behaviour, Cedric with difficulty could keep his countenance. Tea was brought in, and Cedric was forcibly reminded of a scene in *Alice in Wonderland*. He thought it was a good thing, however, that he was present to 'keep things going,' but was heartily glad when Mrs. Manning retired to her room.

'Now, what is it? If I help you to get out of going to the theatre I expect something in return. It isn't really the City, is it?'

Tom looked up wofully. 'It is at present,' he said. He became apprehensive. The number of lies which would have to be told seemed to have increased wonderfully on a sudden. 'We'll have a talk to-night,

when you come back from the theatre. I shall have thought things over by then.'

'All right, but do try to be cheerful in front of Mrs. Manning. She gets worried, you know, if you don't explain things to her.'

'Oh! I'll explain things sometime. Blanche is all right.' The poor fellow was so absorbed with the Sheridan business that it is open to doubt whether the most unsatisfactory behaviour on Mrs. Manning's part could have added to his discomfiture. The desire, moreover, to tell Cedric everything at once, and by that to remove some part of the load from his own shoulders, tempted him to throw what tact and diplomacy he proposed to make use of to the winds; but he remembered the theatre party, and saw that nothing could be done at the moment. If Ruth was to know nothing at the theatre, Cedric should also remain in ignorance, at any rate until he had bidden her good-night. Cedric, breaking in upon his thoughts, inquired whether the piece they were to see was a comedy or a drama. It occurred to Tom that he was himself an involuntary player in a melodrama, where in the course of the third act he as heavy father was parting the lovers. He replied that he did not know, but that whatever it was, it was dam clever. He fully realized now how much happier Cedric had become in the last few weeks, and as he watched his friend nibble a biscuit and turn his eyes towards the window, whilst his feet patted the carpet, he could not help thinking how like Cedric was then to the 'fresher' he had known and loved, how unlike that monster of depravity which Mr. Sheridan had described to him. Every moment it appeared harder to break in upon what Tom looked upon as a fool's paradise. To confide

in his wife seemed the wisest course, and yet he shrank from such a plan. Blanche must know nothing about the Sheridan *fracas*, no one must know, he thought. He would never explain anything to Blanche, even if the consequences were to prove of the gravest nature. No one should learn the true state of affairs ; he would have to work out a series of explanatory stories. His heart sank as he began to recognise the depth of the waters into which he proposed to wade.

‘I’ll go and get the tickets,’ he said ; ‘they’re up in my room. You dine at the Criterion. I shall have a bone or something here.’ This was essentially an evening when a paucity of food would not only be somehow in keeping with what had gone before, but a fit accompaniment to the melancholy thoughts in which he proposed to indulge until Cedric’s return. A bone, a crust, a glass of water—that was to be his menu. He went upstairs, and opened the door of his dressing-room with an expression on his face that might have been looked for with reason on the countenance of a condemned murderer about to take part in the final act of his life.

The dinner at the Criterion was the means of giving unalloyed pleasure to all save Mrs. Sheridan, who candidly admitted that she was not quite herself. If Ruth had had nothing to think of save this evening’s party and the delight of being once again with Cedric, her mother could not forget that her husband’s behaviour during the past two days meant anything but peace for the immediate future. She was beginning to understand in what way Ruth looked upon Cedric Readham. ‘He is not the playfellow,’ she told herself, and sighed and laughed alternately. But nothing had been said to her daughter. Ruth was happy—

happy in a way that meant things other than mere good-fellowship—and that could not be without her mother's knowledge.

Yet in the numerous *tête-à-tête* in which Cedric and she had indulged, nothing in the nature of a suggestion about their future had been so much as hinted at, but Cedric had kissed her once. It had been quite an unpremeditated act, and by a piece of irony, which the girl appreciated later, it had taken place in Mr. Sheridan's dining-room. Ruth had gone to the sideboard to get a box of cigars. Cedric had followed, and was leaning over her shoulder. 'This one do?' she had asked, taking one in her hand. 'Rather!' His hands had rested on her shoulders, and, gently pushing her round until her face was opposite his own, he had looked into her eyes for a moment, and then kissed her on the lips. The cigar, he had gone on to observe, was a splendid one. Others before him had kissed her, but his kiss had been different. She could not have explained further.

Now, as she sat next to Cedric in the restaurant, she realized what an interpretation she had put upon that kiss. He was laughing and joking with her—he, who was so different from the others; and she laughed from pure contentment. No one, she thought, not even Cedric himself, could ever quite understand in what way she looked upon him, what he meant to her, what worship she had for him.

The orchestra was playing a selection from Offenbach.

CHAPTER XII

WHICH SHOWS CEDRIC AT THE MERCY OF THE CURRENT

DURING the hours which Tom Manning gave over to meditation many pipes were smoked, many tumblers of whisky-and-soda emptied at a singularly even pace. There was but a short time for deliberation, for Cedric had to be told everything that night, and he himself had to settle how best the news was to be told. After a mental straining of the severest possible nature, Tom was enabled to arrive at more than one conclusion. For an elderly gentleman, he thought, with somewhat peculiar views upon religious matters—so peculiar, indeed, that many people called him a crank—to forbid his house to a young man without those views, but with others on the subject of his daughter, was in a generality of cases likely to be no serious catastrophe; yet Readham was at all times so curiously balanced that poor Tom could find no means of ascertaining with any degree of likelihood in what way he would receive the news.

‘And then, of course, the most damnable part of the whole business is that all I’ve done is no good at all—absolutely futile.’ He groaned miserably. This came at the end of the third whisky-and-soda.

Now, no one save honest Tom himself believed that Nature had endowed him with any great shrewdness

of mind ; but he was certainly well aware that in Cedric's nature lay side by side, as it were, two antagonistic influences, the one inclining him towards something that with Tom's limited vocabulary could only be described as 'hermitish,' the other and far more satisfactory of the two leading him to forget all morbid imaginings and become the agreeable companion whom all, with one or two exceptions, seemed to like so much. Moreover, something warned him now that very little would be needed to send Cedric back along the old track. He did not know how sensitive a man Cedric was, but there could be no disguise to the fact that his friend, good fellow that he undoubtedly was, had always shown a rather morbid inclination towards self-analysis and melancholy—two qualities for which he himself entertained the liveliest contempt.

He had filled the fourth tumbler, and was about to sit down again at his desk, when he caught sight of his face in a mirror over the mantelpiece. Was he really so pale, so haggard ? Had the frugal meal—more than a bone and crust, but undeniably meagre and unsatisfying—done its work ? For a moment a wan smile flickered across his countenance. He might, he thought, have been engaged in one of those quasi-hostile encounters with his wife. But such engagements had been rare of late, and Tom admitted that he owed much to Cedric. Since his friend had come to London, Blanche had rarely if ever occasioned him the least worry. He wished now to do all that was possible in the Sheridan business.

'Damn Sheridan !' he said, addressing the reading-lamp as usual. 'The whole thing is preposterous.'

Again he sat down, lit the pipe that was constantly going out, attempted to marshal in front of him all the

facts of the case, and, as before, failed to arrive any nearer to a satisfactory solution to the painful problem—how he was to break the news to Cedric. And then, before he had realized what had happened, there was a rustle of skirts, a sound of cheerful laughter, and Blanche and Cedric burst upon him. The party, they said, had been a tremendous success; the piece might have been written by Arthur Lacey. Blanche had cried during the third act; Ruth had declared that a peculiarly dismal character in the play had been taken from her father, and Mrs. Sheridan ‘had not been herself.’ Poor Tom had missed something extremely delicate at the Criterion, but then, as Blanche supposed, he had had his compensation in the quiet of his study and the soothing influence of his pipe. Her poor darling, she hoped, had by now forgotten all his business worries. Had he a headache? Mrs. Sheridan had given her an infallible recipe. Ruth had sent him her fondest love. Was he sulky? It must be those horrid whiskies-and-sodas. At any rate, she was going to bed at once, if Cedric would excuse her. The theatre made one so tired, and it was always such a relief to take off a dress after its first appearance in public.

Tom could not speak. He let himself be kissed, he listened in silence to his wife’s remarks, he looked at Cedric with that patient expression peculiar, as is generally supposed, to the beast of burden.

Cedric lit a cigarette, and prepared to listen to some fantastic idea which he supposed Tom had got into his head.

‘Well, what is it?’ said he.

Tom uttered an exclamation which sounded like *ehou*, and was meant to imply distress.

'Now, out with it,' said Cedric good-humouredly—
'out with it. I have had an excellent dinner—the
wine was thunderingly good ; you told me to order the
best—and I've thoroughly enjoyed myself. The play
interested me, I was with people I like, and I'm at
peace with all the world ; so I'm willing to listen to
anything.'

Tom looked more scared than ever.

'You see,' he whispered, 'it's nothing to do with
Blanche or me.'

'The housemaid ?' suggested Cedric.

Tom shook his head dolefully.

'Is it about me ?'

Tom admitted the fact. Cedric looked hard at him.
'Look here,' he said, 'you've been worrying yourself
about Ruth Sheridan and myself ; I know you have,
and I'm grateful—but you mustn't worry any more.'
He laughed happily. 'I'll let you into a secret, Tom ;
I'm going up to Chelsea to-morrow or the day after—
I don't know which yet—and I'm going to . . . My
dear Tom, what on earth is the matter with you ?'

Tom poured himself out some neat whisky and
drank it off.

'Old Sheridan has asked me to tell you that . . .
you see, of course, it's absurd, but you know what he
is ; he's asked me to tell you . . . you'd better not
go to the Sheridans' again just yet.' He finished
apologetically.

'What on earth has Sheridan been . . . ?'

'He won't have you in the house, Cedric. That's
the long and the short of it. Now you know this
ridiculous nonsense which has been worrying the life
out of me. I'm so sick about the whole business that
I don't know what to do, but to see Ruth again for a

little time is out of the question. The old fool is going to cart her and Mrs. Sheridan into the country, and not all her tricks will stop him. They'll stay in the country until you have gone away. Of course, he has found out about your books and the "Open-hearts." I shall arrange something, but just now I don't know what's to be done. I don't want to tell Blanche anything. He is not going to say anything about you, except that he thinks you are going out of London.' The sentences had followed one another quickly, and Tom heaved a sigh of relief on finding that he had delivered himself of his burden.

Cedric was standing motionless. A great throb had passed through him, and he could almost hear the beatings of his heart. 'So he does not want me in the house,' he said in a curious monotone.

Tom growled out a reply. 'Now, Cedric,' he continued, 'you want to see Ruth, and she wants to see you. I will . . .'

'My dear Tom,' replied Cedric, with the old smile, sadly tolerant of all the supposed injustices which from Cambridge days had been heaped upon him, 'you must not worry yourself in the slightest. I've given enough trouble as it is. I shall go back to Chipton to-morrow; my aunt wants me, and my holiday has been absurdly protracted as it is.' He took up the whisky, and poured some out into a tumbler. He had spoken slowly, as though he was choosing his words with care. He was rather pale, and the glass shook slightly, but Tom did not notice these things; he was wondering how Cedric could take the news with such apparent indifference. Had he made a mistake in his friend's character? Had not Cedric, after all, succumbed to Ruth's charms? Had there merely been a

flirtation *pour passer le temps* ? 'Of course,' continued Cedric, 'I am not the kind of person to visit the Sheridans. My views don't agree with Sheridan's. To have views, Tom, may mean a lot, or more often nothing at all, but people don't know that. As Ruth would say, I'm not churchy enough. I shall not see any of them again—that goes without saying; but you, of course, will give them my words of farewell, and so forth.' He put out his hand as he saw Tom about to speak. 'Wait a moment, Tom. You want me, I suppose, to call Sheridan all the ugly names I can invent, swear nothing will ever tear me away from Ruth, and so on, but somehow it is very repulsive to be mock-heroic. I am very fond of Ruth, but then I am different from other men. I shall simply go away. Now let us talk of something else. I understand everything. Give me a cigarette.'

Tom was honestly frightened. 'My dear old chap, heaps of fathers are like that when their daughters begin to have . . .'

Cedric laid his hand on the other's shoulder. 'If I can be silent about the matter,' he said, 'do you mind saying nothing about it? There is really nothing more to be said.'

'But there is a great deal more to be said,' exclaimed Tom with some heat; 'you forget that others besides yourself are implicated. Think of Ruth.'

Cedric's lip quivered. 'We are not engaged.'

'But you don't suppose she wants you to go away? I could arrange hundreds of meetings. You've been with her before without the old man suspecting anything.'

'You are talking as though I were some schoolboy hanging round the divinity's house, waiting to accom-

pany her under the cover of darkness to the nearest pillar-box.' His voice changed to a higher pitch. 'If I'm selfish I can't help it. It's been very good of you to have me, but I suppose this sort of thing was bound to happen. Now, Tom, if you value our friendship you will let me receive a letter to-morrow morning, or a wire—anything will do—calling me back to Chipton, and away I shall go. It will be a trick, Tom, the sort of trick that one reads of in novels, but it must be done. We shall have to take part in a little acting at the breakfast-table—that is, if you want to avoid——'

'Damn it, man,' roared Tom, anger and disappointment for the moment opening his eyes more widely than usual, 'you're simply cutting off your nose to spite your face—hang it, well, I mean something like that. You're even trying to be a little pleased with yourself because you're in a sort of scene. You've been like that before, and it's damnable for you and not fair to your friends. If a man is his own worst enemy how d' you think he is to be helped?'

Cedric held out his hand. 'Good-night,' he said quietly. 'I'll tell Mrs. Manning about going myself. You need not say anything.'

A minute later Tom was once again sitting alone in his study. That his own sex in general, and Mr. Sheridan and Cedric in particular, were idiots was the only conviction at which he could arrive.

Cedric in his bedroom was sitting in a chair by the bed. He had the look of the beaten man.

'Oh, it hurts me, it hurts me,' he was whispering to himself. 'My pride and my heart—both hurt!' He covered his face with his hands. Even at that moment, however, he began in the old way to review his own

'case,' impersonally as it were. A reverse had been the lot of some Cedric Readham whom he knew, and the man was now in a state of considerable psychological interest. He laughed bitterly, and it was as though the other man had laughed. The visit to London had ended miserably. It had been nothing but a huge mistake ; he had been duping himself. As he had told himself at Chipton, nothing mattered very much, nothing mattered at all. A man died famous, beloved by thousands, or a man died unknown, or he died hated and reviled ; where was the difference ? Denmanism was true after all.

There was a train to Chipton in the morning. Cedric drove-off from Sloane Street after breakfast. Fortunately a note had come from the Dowager that morning, and a few words of hurried explanation had sufficed for Blanche. To her the return to Chipton meant nothing more than at most a week's absence from London. A smile and a look in Tom's direction were all the signs of interest which she had vouchsafed.

The cabman had been told to drive straight to Paddington station, but after Sloane Street had been left behind Cedric altered his mind.

'Drive to the Junior Athenæum,' he said.

He entered his club with the idea of going through some final dramatic scene before oblivion at Chipton. He was acting, so he liked to suppose, to an unseen audience in a play of life. At present he did not care to think of Ruth and the others ; it was this play which was to hold his whole attention. If a reaction had to come, when he would realize how far Tom had spoken the truth, whether, indeed, his departure had been the outcome of false pride, of the love of self-martyr-

dom, or of a desire for self-pity, well, he would wait for its appearance in the library at Chipton. There, perhaps, he would be able to work, to forget what had passed during the last few weeks in London.

The night before he had gone over each little incident of his stay in Sloane Street almost as a stimulant to his agony. He had told himself that this was the only course which his philosophy would allow him never to regret. He had attempted to view the problem—so he named his relations with Ruth and the Mannings—from every possible standpoint ; he had even remembered his words to Blanche earlier in the day about the little things of life. This might be one of life's little things. The Mannings and Ruth herself could perhaps make things right, but his pride would suffer, and there was the risk of failure. It would be better to go away. A departure, a further span, for what time he did not care to think, at Chipton would only show him that he had gauged himself correctly—a man apart from others. He had not slept. Hour had succeeded hour, and still, sometimes involuntarily, sometimes by an effort of will, he had kept his mind fixed on this culminating tragedy. That was his definition.

He had ceased to think that he was to have asked Ruth to be his wife. He spoke to his invisible audience when facts had proved that cynicism was very necessary ; it was a time to consider himself alone. 'I am not in love with her,' the philosopher in him had said, 'or how could I go away ?' and the cynic had answered, 'And if you were in love, what matter ? One is obliged to fall in with the Fates' decision. And what is your love, after all ?—an expression of selfishness.'

He lunched at the Carlton—the audience should enjoy that, the outcast in the midst of luxury and

happiness. This was to be his last look at the world. As he sat down at a table a shudder passed through his frame. After all, this scene of his was nothing more than a species of cheap melodrama, of mock heroism. His pride had not bidden him do this ; but he ordered the best luncheon. It would be interesting, he mused, to recall his emotions at a later time. Perhaps they might be used for a book. He decided upon champagne.

There was a little girl sitting with her parents at the next table. Cedric could see that she was gazing at the different things in the great room. An expression of wonder was on her face. Evidently this was her first visit.

‘It’s exactly like a scene on the stage,’ she observed at last in loud childish tones.

Cedric started. A moment later he was beckoning to the waiter.

‘I don’t want champagne,’ he said irritably. ‘Bring me a whisky-and-soda.’

CHAPTER XIII

A VISIT TO ARCHESTER

MRS. PUDDOCK's opinion of anyone seldom underwent a change except for the worse. By consequence no words of Lady Cardellan's could make her believe that Mr. Cedric had gone to London with any intention but that of 'wastin' 'is time and susstance in the pussuit of all the 'orrible traps young men similar to 'isself like to find ready waitin' for them.' 'In they go all of a lump, like,' said she, 'just all of a 'eap, and they like to stay as long as ever they can. That's just the perwersity of 'em. Why, Puddock would 'ave been just the same 'ad he been born other than 'e is.'

'Nonsense, Sarah,' Lady Cardellan had answered with a little laugh. 'Mr. Cedric has gone to stay with a college friend of his who is married.'

Mrs. Puddock shook her head. 'They're all the same,' she averred; 'you get your clergymen to preach for all they're worth about the gates of 'ell an' all that, and bless me if every young man don't go off an' look for them gates, an' jolly soon 'e opens them, my lady. Mark my words, Mr. Cedric 'll come back sick o' London, sick of all the gaiety and sichlike, an' then with all 'is thinkin' an' that, you don't know what to expect. Still, I says, my lady, that 'ome 'e'll come soon enough. 'E wants to travel, an' I wish old

Puddock could go along of 'im. 'Twould do 'em both good.'

'I am afraid Mr. Cedric does not like the idea of travelling,' said Lady Cardellan.

Mrs. Puddock shrugged her shoulders. 'Then 'e ain't no Readham,' she said bluntly.

'He is a Readham,' replied Lady Cardellan seriously, 'but there are times when for some reason or other he obliterates the fact from his mind.'

Mrs. Puddock sniffed rather contemptuously. She was about to enlarge upon the supposed iniquities of Mr. Cedric when her attention was diverted by the entrance of her long-suffering spouse.

But when Cedric, tired, more apathetic, gloomier, and more depressed than ever before, appeared in Chipton, and took up his abode at his aunt's house, as though, indeed, his visit to London had been one of hours or days instead of weeks, Mrs. Puddock's full attention was accorded him with results which, while no doubt pleasurable to that good woman herself, did not tend to make Lady Cardellan easier in mind. There was no mistaking the triumph in Mrs. Puddock's voice as she remarked on the manner of the prodigal—such he was to her. Lady Cardellan made no reply. She was waiting to hear what had happened from Cedric himself. Yet the mere wish to learn the reason of her nephew's sudden return had sprung up in her breast entirely on account of Mrs. Puddock's various asseverations concerning his brief visit to the metropolis. The days, however, passed, and Cedric gave no signs of a willingness to proffer any account. She taxed him one afternoon on the subject.

'My sudden return?' he said. A frown passed over his forehead, but it was gone in a moment. 'Did I

return suddenly? Yes, I suppose I did,' he added with a poor attempt at a laugh. 'I got tired of the life there. The Mannings are charming, and I went out a good deal, met interesting people—I did really enjoy myself as I've told you before—but somehow London doesn't agree with me, or I don't agree with London, so I came away.' The sad smile crossed his face. Lady Cardellan nodded to show that she would accept that explanation for the present, but she was thinking hard. Had there possibly been some tragedy in his life other than his mother's death, some tragedy which kept bringing out those qualities in him that hardly recalled either Readham or Wilmot stock? Had something happened of which she knew and was to know nothing?

'And so I suppose you will stay with me for some time?' she said.

'I hope so,' Cedric answered her. 'I shall finish some work I have planned out.'

'And then?' hazarded Lady Cardellan incautiously perhaps.

Cedric stared at her. The question was unexpected. 'I might travel,' he said. 'I should like to get away from England for a year or two.' He did not think that he might be paining his aunt. He got up from his chair and walked across the room to the window. 'I think I shall walk over to Archester,' he went on. 'Had you thought of doing anything, auntie?'

'Nothing at all. I shall read.' She looked out of the window to see clouds gathering over the trees. 'It's going to rain, Cedric. I don't think you'll enjoy a walk if a storm comes up. Is there any particular reason for your visit? Would you like the carriage?'

‘No, thanks ; I just feel the want of a walk. I can always turn back if it comes on badly.’

He started to walk along Chipton Lane.

The reaction had come at last. Everything about him was still the same ; the clouds still rolled over the sides of the hills ; he could still see the valleys around him ; the little village, patches of brown and red in the dull dark green of a winter scape, in the distance the blue hills—everything seemed the same ; yet, he thought, a subtle change had come on things. It was as though he were back at school on the first day of term. The trees and hedges that surrounded his own home were still to be seen from his room at Rugby ; the same birds sang the same notes in both places ; the same race of human beings walked the streets, lived much the same lives—yet there had been a great difference. And now at Chipton Cedric was conscious that all was not as it had been before. Winter transformed this old lane, but he had walked along it on many a winter’s day before and seen nothing of what met his eyes now. He had come to the first turn in the winding path. ‘I hate the place,’ he was thinking—‘I hate the place.’

He had heard from Tom. The Sheridans had left London, and were away somewhere in Essex. Blanche wrote hinting broadly that his presence in London was urgently needed, perhaps on account of more than a single happening. Tom was so difficult just at present, she wrote, and Mr. Readham understood him so well ; but Cedric had a reply ready. His holidays, at any rate for the present, were over ; there was work to be done. And that was all that Mrs. Sheridan or Ruth heard of him. There was work to be done, and Mr. Readham had retired to his country place to do it.

Perhaps Mrs. Sheridan had discovered the truth, perhaps Ruth suspected part of it—Cedric knew nothing of them, did not care to ask. For the present his world meant Chipton and the neighbourhood, and nothing else.

Was it a fact, he was asking himself as he made his way along, that he was finding a sense almost of admiration for his own pitiable isolation? Could it be that what was wretched and puny he was building into something splendid? Webs had been woven round him; it was his unfortunate destiny to suffer, and suffer in silence, with no one but himself to turn to for sympathy; and this constant psychological study of himself was growing keener, he felt, and carried to greater lengths than ever before. Sometimes he became almost frightened at the train of thought that might perchance be passing through his brain. Yet if he knew that he was becoming more morbid every day, more contemptible, more unmanly, he cared nothing. There was so little use in caring. He recalled to mind that last meal of his in London, with that absurd idea about the champagne. It had been simply farcical. He laughed now, and remembered the little girl's remark.

A drop of rain touched his cheek, but he took no notice. A blast of wind, coming across the road with unexpected violence, almost swept him off his feet. He buttoned up his coat and hurried on. He had no reason for going to Archester; he was not even appreciating his walk along Chipton Lane. The wind whistled, a cold rain fell in torrents, the telegraph-wires whizzed out their tunes, but Cedric saw and heard nothing. He reached Archester High Street dripping, but the rain had stopped as suddenly as it

had begun, and the sun once more shone out ruddily from the west. The effect on the wet red-bricked pavements was striking; Cedric was recalled to his surroundings. He slackened pace to look at the old-fashioned cottages which lined the top end of the street. Further down the hill the architecture became more modern and proportionately uglier, until one reached the precincts of the old town at the bottom of the valley. There were one or two diminutive taverns dotted along the street, and twice Cedric stopped and debated whether he should taste of their hospitality, but each time he continued his way with an exclamation of annoyance. To drink and stand up in front of a fire round which a lot of labourers were lapping up their beer would, he thought, hardly have pleased his present state of mind—they would be ‘so devilishly contented.’

He reached the bottom of the street, and was about to retrace his steps for want of a better way home, when a shower of rain shot down. He was standing in front of the *Red Rat Arms*, a blatantly new structure, the lower half of which had been walled with glazed green bricks. Cedric was tempted to take shelter, and risk contented labourers. He walked into the saloon bar. There was a large fire burning in the grate, and one or two men were talking over their pipes. Cedric sat down on one of the forms that ran along a side of the low room. Glancing round the place, his eyes rested on a poster adorning one of the walls. A London company was visiting the town of Archester for that week in the new play by Arthur Lacey, *Sarah-Jane*. Cedric put his glass down and walked across the room to get a nearer view. So one of Lacey’s plays was to be performed in Archester that night!

'I'll go,' said Cedric to himself; and he laughed a little. Here was something to do. He had never been in the Archester theatre before. It would be a new experience, and he knew Lacey, which gave an interest to the play. 'I will see *Sarah-Jane*,' he murmured, and looked at the men at the bar almost shamefacedly. One of them spoke to him. Great things were expected of this play; to-night was the 'premyer.' The barmaid announced that she would go one night, most probably Friday, as that was the best night for receiving passes. 'I generally gets one a week,' she observed.

Cedric waited until the rain had stopped, and then sauntered to the post-office to send a wire to Chipton. A few doors off stood the theatre. He walked into the box-office and obtained a seat.

A couple of hours later he was sitting in the front row of the stalls. The theatre was a small one, brightly decorated in pale blue and gold. An orchestra that made up for the comparative paucity of its numbers and the indifference of individual talent by a boundless enthusiasm, had begun to play a lively march. The man at the drums evidently regarded its performance as the one chance which came his way during the evening, for he hammered at his instruments with little or no regard, it seemed, for the conductor, who at intervals lent weight to the march by striking his own violin. Cedric looked about him. The pit and gallery were already full, and there was a hum of voices in running accompaniment to the music. 'Good old tune, Billy,' shouted someone from the gallery during a passage played *pianissimo*. There was a roar of laughter. The march was evidently well known in the theatre. If a new play was given every three days,

or at any rate every week, it was the same orchestra which night after night fulfilled its duty of passing those distressing periods, described as intervals, by the offer of a limited number of selections performed in rotation. Cedric turned round in his seat to get a look at the upper tiers. Parties were coming in now ; it was going to be a full house. A young man and a boy came to the seats next to his own. Cedric listened to their conversation.

‘ This is their opening night,’ said the man, ‘ and it’s only a sort of dress rehearsal. They go to Borthampton next week ; Archester isn’t considered a good place, so instead of having their final rehearsals with no one to watch, they give the play here. Good idea, isn’t it ? Oh, I know a good deal about the footlights one way and another,’ he added with a little laugh.

The boy looked at his companion with something like awe written across his face. The man, who was little more than a boy himself, was twirling a diminutive moustache. He was wearing a very yellow tie, and a collar that made Cedric as uncomfortable to look at it as he imagined it must be making its owner to wear it. ‘ Know any of the company ?’ continued the boy.

‘ One or two,’ replied the other, looking down the programme. ‘ Bessie Greenholt I know ; she’s a nice little girl. Miss Gormaston is good. I don’t know her personally. Olive Ranger—I don’t remember hearing of her ; a beginner, I expect. Oh, did you know that Arthur Lacey is here himself ? I saw him myself with my own eyes this afternoon in the town. Just like his photographs !’

‘ No !’ It was something, thought the boy, to be with a man who had actually seen such a celebrity—

something to be in the same building with the dramatist. 'I suppose he's behind?' he said.

'Sure to be. Like to go there, Jack?'

'Behind? Rather.'

'I might manage it,' said the other; 'but of course it's difficult, especially on a first night.'

Cedric became interested. So Lacey was in the place, if this young Archester gentleman had been speaking the truth. For a moment he debated whether he should send round his card. Lacey was an amusing man. He was one of the characters whom Cedric proposed to draft into his new novel. But he remembered that he had met Lacey only at the Sheridans' house. Awkward questions might be put. It would be better not to see him. He glanced at his programme; none of the actors' names were familiar. It was rather odd, he thought, that he should find himself in this little provincial theatre. How Aunt Evelyn would laugh when he told her the reason for his remaining in Archester so late! The wire had merely warned her that he would not be home until midnight.

An electric bell rang somewhere near the stage; the march ended with some abruptness, and the incidental music, a very powerful asset to many of the plays that visited Archester, began. Lights went out in the auditorium, and the curtain rose. The scene on the stage was a library, and Cedric was surprised at the freshness of the 'set.' He settled himself back in his seat, and prepared to give Lacey's work the closest attention.

The play opened well, Cedric thought, for his interest was awakened at the start. That was perhaps one of Lacey's ingredients for success. He did not forget that motto drilled into him in schooldays—*ἀρχὴ ἡμῶν πάντος*. Let your audience have no time to

ask themselves if the play is likely to be dull, he might have said, and the play may be a success. Start well, and then, as you unfold your story, allow nothing to lower your 'tone.' This woman Sarah-Jane Cedric instinctively disliked from the moment when she had uttered her first words ; but for Charlotte, who had as yet not even appeared on the stage, he had already a large measure of sympathy. It was almost as though he knew the woman before ever he saw her. And then Olive Ranger walked on to the stage, and for a moment no word was spoken.

Cedric started with amazement. He knew her face quite well. Stage, theatre, Archester, England, all faded from his mind ; he was back again in Ostend with Hetherington, gazing into the window of one of the hotels. And then the scene on the steamer came back to him. 'She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.' He remembered his own words. But this Charlotte was not the girl of the steamer : she was the woman whom he had seen with Lord Sothernmere. The coincidence was an extraordinary one—to see her again in this theatre to which chance and a shower of rain had brought him. And as she played her part, Cedric's wonder and admiration grew. The piece gripped the audience too ; everyone sat motionless. Olive's clear low voice rang through the house. Charlotte was a woman who might have stopped short of nothing in order to gain her ends, but Lacey had done his work subtly, and the sympathy of the audience was given unreservedly to this woman of the world, this unscrupulous creature, who laughed at the narrow morality of those with whom she had perforce to mix, instead of to the faint-hearted but 'good' heroine, as played by Miss Gormaston.

'Grand,' murmured the boy next to him ; and Cedric wondered how the lad could be appreciating such a character. He himself understood well enough ; here was the woman sinning freely, yet bound in meshes, sighing for freedom, but forced into a prison, as it were, a dull cold place, where virtue could not merge into vice, where were only rules—hard-and-fast rules—a bigotry that meant nothing more than ignorance, a hypocrisy that was called by a fairer though falsier name. Wretch, they called her ; wretch she might be to many, but there was something in her nature which these puppets did not, could not, understand. Cedric's enthusiasm was aroused. Lacey had scaled heights Cedric had thought to be impregnable, and he wondered how much this country audience was reading into the play. Little enough, he supposed, yet sufficient to hold them spellbound. Charlotte was human, and humanity strikes a chord in the minds of the ignorant. The curtain fell on the first act to the accompaniment of loud cheers.

Cedric rose from his seat and went to the box-office. One thing only seemed essential now—to meet this girl who had come again into his life. He learnt that Mr. Lacey was in the house, and scribbled a few lines, without, however, mentioning any name save his own. A commissioner offered to bring Cedric the answer to his stall, and just before the 'fair' scene, in which Mr. Pilling and Mr. Throstle were to perform a country dance—*paderder*, they termed it—slipped into his hand a note hurriedly written in pencil :

'Delighted to hear that you are in the house. Come round to the stage door at the end, and ask for me. Shall expect you to sup with me. Only here for two or three days.—Yours, A. L.'

A feeling of satisfaction stole over Cedric. The curtain had gone up, and the fair was in full progress. Mr. Pilling danced with Mr. Throstle amid roars from the gallery. Mr. Topham amused himself by meandering in and out of groups of villagers in the guise of a pedlar. A watch for sale, price two shillings and sixpence! What more could anyone ask for? A watch that really went, for half a dollar! The pedlar became less enthusiastic over his profession as the minutes passed, and finally slunk off the stage, with a look at once of disappointment and contempt on his face. He had finished his small part, but Cedric could see him waiting in the wings, his eyes fixed on Messrs. Pilling and Throstle. It made a quaint picture, this country fair, and Cedric enjoyed the fun and banter passed across the stage; but he was eager for the reappearance of Charlotte. She came at last in disguise. He recognised her before she had spoken. Was it his fancy or the disguise that made her appear so much more of the girl of the Ostend packet, ~~so~~ much less of the woman in the hotel? She spoke, and still Cedric thought of her as the girl. This queer change—he could call it nothing else—fascinated him. What did it mean? Had Lacey realized it as he had himself at Ostend? Or was it conscious, a woman's trick to play on men? She was speaking now, and the stage was clearing. The buffoonery was over. Mr. Pilling and Mr. Throstle nudged each other in the usual manner as they stared at Charlotte, and joined Mr. Topham. Cedric felt that Charlotte was scheming for the downfall of her enemy, Sarah-Jane, incidentally for her own freedom. It was not that she was a vindictive woman, but that the overthrow of the other woman was necessary for her own liberty. Lacey

was telling his story in a manner as clear and simple as it was dramatic. The curtain dropped for a second time at a moment when the audience was worked up to an almost uncomfortable pitch of excitement.

In hands other than Lacey's, thought Cedric, *Sarah-Jane* might have degenerated into cheap drama ; as it was, he was inclined to think it a masterpiece. The boy next him was expressing his approbation in no measured terms to the man with the yellow tie. The latter admitted that the play was fair, if a little crude. He used the word 'crude' from the fact of his not being quite sure of its meaning, but inasmuch as he was certain that the boy shared his ignorance, this could not matter very much.

'I'm all for Charlotte!' exclaimed the boy. An impulse led him to speak to Cedric. 'Aren't you?' he asked.

'One's sympathy is intended to be given to Charlotte, of course,' replied Cedric, with a smile.

'She's very beautiful,' continued the boy rapturously.

Cedric nodded in acquiescence.

But Lacey had some fine work still in hand. In the third and last act Charlotte showed herself as the woman Cedric had long since decided she was. There was a successful appeal to her womanhood. The other woman, the poor despised Sarah-Jane, was, after all, a woman like herself. She, too, was possessed of much that women like to think their own sex's prerogative. There was a bond of union. Miss Gormaston had held the house for a little time. There had to be considered Sarah-Jane's point of view ; perhaps in her case also there had been a misunderstanding. Miss Gormaston, who would have given

much to exchange parts with Olive Ranger, though she could not but admit that the latter was playing Charlotte as she herself could never have played it, fully bore out her reputation as an accomplished actress. Sarah-Jane was fully understanding the other woman's love now, and, when Charlotte the Avenger came on, could plead her own woman's heart. They had both loved the same man; how could he help his love? And then on a sudden, at the very moment, indeed, when Cedric was asking himself whether Lacey was not running into a mistake, Charlotte broke down utterly. The boy in the stalls pretended to blow his nose, an unnecessary action in itself, but one calculated to hide the tears that would not be kept back. His companion examined the programme with some care, and then turned to the scenery, which he proceeded to scrutinize. It was then, too, that Cedric for the first time found his attention being drawn away from the play, even though it was only for a moment. That scene between the two women had brought Ruth Sheridan to mind, but he drew himself up with a jerk, and his entire interest was again given to the women on the stage.

And when the curtain descended for the last time handkerchiefs were in very general use. But a laugh rose when the conductor tapped the end of the stage with his bow, and the orchestra played a popular melody. It was sheer bathos, but somehow Cedric felt thankful for it.

He walked round to the stage-door. He was reflecting upon the apparent incongruity between the Lacey whom he knew as the idle, paradox-loving talker, and the Lacey who could write a play like *Sarah-Jane*. It seemed that the dramatist wore a

mask sometimes. Perhaps, he thought, it might be necessary, after all, for him to do the same.

Lacey was unquestionably glad to see him. He was standing in a little low square room, devoid of all furniture save a small table in one corner, on which stood a number of glasses and a jug of beer. The walls had been distempered a dull grey, but were now disfigured by a multitude of cartoons executed for the most part in grease-paints, and more remarkable for the brilliancy of their colouring than for any artistic merit they might be said to possess.

'Ah, my dear fellow,' said the dramatist, 'this is indeed a pleasure. You see me in no less a place than the green-room of the Archester theatre.'

They shook hands.

'You must let me congratulate you . . .' began Cedric.

'Oh, please,' interrupted the other, 'anything but a discussion about my work. We shall have enough of that at supper. Now, tell me, how are our charming friends the Sheridans?'

Cedric had prepared himself. 'To tell you the truth,' said he, 'I expect you have seen them since I have myself. My little holiday in London has been over some time now.'

'Then, my dear Readham, how is it that we meet here?'

'My aunt, Lady Cardellan, lives at a little village near here. I am living with her for the present. I happened to be passing through Archester, saw a notice of your play, and walked in. Do you know, this is my first visit to the theatre here, although I've lived in the neighbourhood on and off for years?'

'I can understand that,' returned Lacey, offering his cigarette-case. 'My profession brings me into

very curious places, of which this is not the least interesting. You sup with me, of course? I am staying at the Station Hotel. Quite a Johnsonian place—quaint, one might call it. I think the authorities that be are a little shocked at the idea of my supper-party.'

'I shall be delighted,' said Cedric.

'I have asked Davenport, our manager,' continued the dramatist, 'Sir Joshua, Sarah-Jane, and last, but not least, my own particular protégée, Charlotte. Ah! you liked her, I can see. Then I think you will like Miss Ranger.'

Mr. Throstle peered in, but, seeing Lacey, was about to beat a hurried retreat, when the dramatist called him back.

'Come in, Mr. Throstle—come in.' He turned to Cedric. 'I suppose we had better be going.' Cedric followed him out of the green-room down a long, narrow passage, up a few steps, past a little recess in the wall which the custodian of the stage-door liked to call his office, and into the street, where a small crowd of gaping youths had collected in order to obtain a closer view of the actresses than had been afforded them in the house. Lacey hurriedly made his way into the road that ran to the station, talking as he went.

'You will be interested in Davenport,' said he; 'he is what I call the product *par excellence* of Shaftesbury Avenue. There will probably be a little verbal duel between Miss Gormaston and Miss Ranger, but I shall be judiciously flattering. Of course, Olive Ranger . . .'

'She is very beautiful,' interrupted Cedric almost involuntarily.

Lacey looked at him, but only nodded.

'I shall be very glad to know her,' Cedric continued. 'She struck me as being . . .'

'Oh, don't say "an accomplished actress,"' pleaded the dramatist.

Cedric laughed. 'The damning with faint praise?' he queried.

'Something of the sort,' replied the other. 'As a matter of fact, it is her first big part. Davenport did not want her to have it; but we are getting perilously near "shop," and that is distressing. Tell me about Mr. Manning. I always try to talk football to him, just as I always talk French theatres to Baron d'Horloge. The dear Baron!—I lunched with him to-day before I came down here. He is endeavouring to adopt some perfectly harmless farce to suit his country's tastes. Well, here we are.'

They had arrived at the hotel. Originally a Jacobite inn, famed throughout the county for its grill-room and bowling alley, for the inevitable bedroom which had once been occupied by some scion of a royal house, it had on the arrival of the railway been enclosed, as it were, in a none too picturesque shell of mid-Victorian architecture. One walked through a large hall, in which there were pillars painted to resemble marble, into a corridor. This decreased in size as the old part of the inn was approached. It led the way into an irregular apartment, which had arisen out of the old coffee-room and a good portion of what had once been a courtyard. Here the two men sat down in front of a dying fire. The room, save for themselves, was empty. Lacey pointed to several pictures of a more or less commercial pattern, and smiled.

'Those are not Johnsonian, but we must not expect too much.'

A sleepy waiter, napkin under arm, appeared in the doorway, and in broken English inquired whether Mr. Lacey's guests would be arriving 'at once or in a time.' He appeared to be rather frightened of the dramatist, and executed manipulations with the napkin whilst he spoke.

'Five minutes,' said Lacey; and the waiter disappeared. 'A waiter,' continued he, 'unless he be English, which is hardly probable nowadays, suggests the bee to me. I like honey, so a bee is necessary to me; but there are times when one connects bees with anything but honey. A waiter is too frightened to sting, but he buzzes.' He was about to continue with a short dissertation upon bees in general, when Mr. Fenton—the Sir Joshua of the play—made his appearance, and a little later Mr. Davenport, in all the glory of evening dress and fur coat, led in the two ladies.

Olive was feeling wonderfully happy. She had done well, and felt that she deserved all the congratulations that had been showered upon her, from the single sentence which Lacey with a handshake had accorded her to the too fulsome utterances of Miss Gormaston and the nervously-delivered commendations of Mr. Pilling. She shook hands with Cedric, looking at him closely.

'I am so glad to know you, Miss Ranger,' he began; 'your acting gave me so much pleasure.' He stopped abruptly. Until that minute he had not realized the difficulty of speaking to her of their former *rencontre* on board the Ostend packet; he had not even asked himself whether she would remember his stares. He was glad when Lacey suggested that they should form a conventional procession, and asked him to take Miss Gormaston's arm. They passed through a glass-panelled door into the dining-room.

'I thought,' began Lacey, 'that we might drink just one toast to our little venture.'

'Little ?' laughed Mr. Davenport. 'I don't call it little.'

'Nor I,' exclaimed Cedric. He was sitting opposite to Olive Ranger, and looked into her face.

'Miss Ranger, you know,' remarked Lacey for Cedric's benefit, 'thought she was going to leave the stage altogether, but of course we could not allow that; she and Miss Gormaston—now, don't listen, ladies, I beg you—form a duumvirate—well, hardly that'—he laughed a little—'but a combination it would be difficult to beat. Now, Mr. Davenport, shall we drink ?'

As they ate of the dishes which Lacey's somewhat epicurean taste had provided, Cedric noted that Miss Gormaston was endeavouring to address her remarks solely to himself. Apparently she regarded him as a man whom it was useful to know. She talked of London society, of the worries and discomforts of provincial lodging houses, of the cosiness of her own little flat in Hampstead, of the nature of the audiences to which she might at one time or another be playing. But as Cedric listened to her chatter, the while Lacey was discussing vintages in a somewhat Meredithian manner with Mr. Davenport, his eyes were turned towards Olive Ranger. He noted the dark hair, the eyes which he thought might have been a child's, the simple brown dress suggestive of country rather than of town—so different, indeed, from the rich velvets and stuffs which clothed Miss Gormaston. He saw the two odd bangles which she wore round her left wrist, and admired a ring with a curious red and yellow stone in the middle of two diamonds. Olive seemed the girl again. She, too, he thought, was

returning his glances with no less interest, and then on a sudden, when for a moment Miss Gormaston's tongue was silent, she broke into a little laugh as she said :

'Didn't I see you, Mr. Readham, on the Ostend boat last summer ?'

'I think we travelled by the same boat.'

Lacey, with his hand upon his glass, shot a questioning glance across the table.

'I was going through Belgium,' continued Cedric. He noticed that Olive had become painfully self-conscious ; perhaps she was remembering those tears of hers. Mr. Davenport unconsciously came to the rescue.

'I did not think Miss Featherstone was quite herself to-night,' he announced ; and Miss Gormaston, thankful that at any rate there was one of the company whom she could revile at the present juncture, heartily endorsed his opinion. Lacey suggested that a few more performances would no doubt work wonders, and skilfully introduced the question of Archester architecture. The supper proceeded. The tired waiter appeared as agile as circumstances would permit. Mr. Davenport did not stint himself of an excellent brand of champagne. A change, however, had come over Olive Ranger. She no longer looked in Cedric's direction, but talked to Miss Gormaston of matters intimately connected with their profession.

'But how do you get home to-night ?' inquired Lacey of Cedric.

'Oh, I shall walk ; it is only four miles, and the rain has stopped.'

'It is so pleasant,' remarked Miss Gormaston, 'to meet someone in a place like this. I hope we shall see something more of you this week ?'

'It is very kind of you,' said Cedric. 'I shall certainly come into town again.'

'You must let me give you some tea one day,' continued Miss Gormaston. 'Now, Mr. Lacey has promised to come to-morrow. Won't you join us?'

'I am overwhelmed,' began Cedric, who had no great desire to see more of the lady than was absolutely necessary; 'but I doubt if I can manage it.'

'Well, you must come if you can.'

'I shall try and bring him, Miss Gormaston,' struck in Lacey. 'There is nothing more pleasant than a dish of Bohea. I expect I shall have just wiped off my correspondence by then.'

Cedric a little later was saying good-bye to Olive Ranger. 'I am so pleased we have met.'

'You must come and see me,' she said, as he helped her on with her cloak; 'I have a funny little room at 15 Hill Street.' She looked laughingly, almost with insolence, into his face. The woman in her had come to the surface; that was the only way in which Cedric could express to himself the change in her. The party broke up, and he started the homeward journey with that last laughing look of Olive's dancing before his eyes.

It could not be said with justice that old Lady Cardellan was possessed of more than ordinary feminine curiosity. With regard to Cedric, moreover, she had long ago recognised the uselessness of attempting to understand the various incongruities in his nature. Her dear nephew was liable to fancy himself sole possessor of such fantastic ideas as made it impossible to know on what occasions his Readham blood might

come to the fore, or be held in subjection by influences as bewildering as they were unexpected. To-day Mrs. Puddock had allowed herself to abuse Cedric roundly for going to Archester on a day which could produce nothing but colds and 'sichlike.' It was enough, said this good woman, to make one quite certain that Cedric's ultimate object could be nothing short of suicide. Fortunately, perhaps, for the efficacy of her argument put forward to uphold this dreadful idea, Cedric's wife had arrived whilst Mrs. Puddock was still with the Dowager. Lady Cardellan read the few words, and owned herself completely puzzled. Here was another proof of the boy's eccentricity. Mrs. Puddock, with her wonted familiarity, hinted that the telegram must be from Mr. Cedric. Lady Cardellan smiled. 'Mr. Cedric,' she said, 'has at last interested himself in something besides his books. And now you must let me write my letters, Sarah,' she added.

It was seldom indeed that Lady Cardellan dismissed Sarah with anything like abruptness, but on the present occasion she wanted to think over things. Hers had never been a suspicious nature, but it seemed so easy to suppose that Cedric's visit to Archester had not been altogether unpremeditated. He had gone to see someone there. Could it be that her nephew had at last found a woman to share his life? She shrugged her shoulders. Really, there was so little besides that which could have taken him to the town; and yet Archester—whom did they know there? It was the fancy of the Dowager's that could she but see Cedric with a wife whom his mother would have loved, her evening days would be spent in unalloyed contentment. Yet she had never spoken to him on the sub-

ject. Cedric would so often put a barrier in front of him.

She dined alone. The fine room had never seemed so large, so bare.

'I shall wait up for Mr. Cedric,' she told the servant, 'but no one else need wait. Put out a little wihe, please.'

The hours passed slowly. Lady Cardellan found herself casting her mind into Cedric's past, and she sighed a little. What was to be his future? Never until now, perhaps, had she realized how far he had allowed himself to slip away from things, to loosen hold on his youth, and to play the man of middle age. Yet it was hard to know what should be done when there was no one to help—least of all, Cedric himself. She laughed softly as she recalled Mrs. Puddock's words. A Readham committing suicide! The idea could only have originated with Sarah. No, Cedric might not be content, he might not be happy, but he was no coward to shrink from facing life. She took down a book from her own little library, and began to read. The volume was a life of her own husband. Her eyes fell on a passage about Cedric. 'In those days,' Lord Cardellan had written, 'my little nephew was a curly-headed chap, a fine sportsman. "Young Saxon," we used to call him. I remember hearing him say that he was going to be an engine-driver, and he appeared ready to fight on my suggestion that in a few years he would be very willing to alter his ideas.' Lady Cardellan turned over a few pages. During the years that Cedric had stayed at Chipton Hall he had never once stayed in Archester for more than an hour at most, and even then only when something was required for herself. He had never shown the least inclination

to know even the few neighbours who were on more than bowing terms with his aunt. With Cedric a guest, she had never dined alone.

‘My dear auntie, how good of you to sit up for me, but how unnecessary! It must be long past one o’clock.’

Her nephew had come in looking strangely excited.

‘It was so unlike you, Cedie,’ she had replied. ‘I thought I must wait up and hear the news to-night.’

‘News? There is no news. I went to the theatre. The play was written by a man I met in London.’ And Lady Cardellan had to be satisfied with that.

CHAPTER XIV

DOWN A NEW LANE

WHEN Cedric the next morning announced his intention of going again to Archester, Lady Cardellan said nothing but that she supposed playwrights were as a whole an interesting class. On further learning that it was his proposal, if she had no objection, to stay in the town, at any rate until the evening, she merely remarked that by this time she was well used to dining alone. She even exhorted him to make the most of his friend's stay in their neighbourhood, as it was to be such a short one. Cedric kissed her good-bye, and hurried off.

Once again Chipton Lane seemed to have altered. As new interests had come into his life, so, he thought, the ugliness of the country had disappeared with the rain and mist, to leave him with a strange presentiment of forthcoming activity and excitement. It was not so much the fact that after all these months something had come to disturb the dull régime of things here away from London, as that this meeting with the girl whom he had seen months before seemed to presage new scenes for him—a new life almost, a life different in every way from that which had hitherto been his. His interest had been awakened in this girl or woman—which was she?—who could play Charlotte as she had

played it, and he thought again of the scene in the Ostend hotel. What had she been doing with Lord Sothernmere? Was she merely one of the many who would pretend to worship at any shrine that presented itself? He laughed as he remembered Miss Gormaston. How different were these two! He would have understood had he seen Miss Gormaston at Ostend.

He hurried his pace. The wind was keenly cold. He had almost reached the town before he realized the vagueness of his programme. A call upon Lacey at this time of day seemed unfair to the dramatist, a visit to Miss Ranger on the face of it impossible. But she had given him her address. He worried himself about her. Who was she? What was she? What was the nature of the fascination she exerted over him? Was it the girl in her, or the woman, or both, which appealed to him? And why had he called her the most beautiful girl he had ever seen? Did he still think that? He began to murmur words to himself. The London episode had been a failure. To think that by now he might have been preparing for his own marriage! 'But I'm not going to think of that now. There is something happening here.' He was speaking in low tones. 'By God!' He suddenly broke into a run. A memory of Ostend had sent the blood swirling to his head. Then he smiled and halted for a minute. He was thankful that the road was deserted.

'There is only one thing to be done,' said he, addressing his stick, 'and that is to let things happen as they will.'

He had come to the top of Ganton Hill, and stopped to survey the town below him. The *Red Rat Arms*, with its green tiles glittering in the bright light, the theatre farther down the valley, and the station with

its hotel over to the left—he could see them all. An early-Gothic church raised its grey spire at the other end of the valley. It was market-day in Archester, and men and women were moving like bees in the little market-place. A soft murmur of sounds reached him. A cloud or two rolled across the skies, casting swiftly-moving shadows. He remembered the new novel upon which he was engaged, and resolved to spend a morning in making a study of these country folk.

In a quarter of an hour he was standing in the market-place, looking at the rough stalls and their owners, one and all shouting the bargains they were willing to make. A butcher, clothed in the blue of his kind, with a long thin knife in his hand, was preparing to make incisions into a huge carcase that lay on his stall. An old woman in a poke bonnet was querulously insisting upon having a 'good cut, same as she was used to having.' A street boy, with a stained cigarette-end between his lips, and hands thrust deep down into trouser-pockets, was watching the scene with interest. Men and women carrying rough basket-bags made their rounds, laughing, talking, screaming, quarrelling with each other. Carts from the neighbouring villages were bringing in their loads of passengers—ancient dames wrapped in huge shawls, nothing on their heads, and armed with baskets and sacks. Cedric wandered in and out amongst the throng. He came upon a little stall in one corner of the market where a few musty-looking volumes were for sale. A bent old man, wearing spectacles, was sitting on a tub by the side of his small stock, poring over the pages of some ancient history. Cedric cast his eyes over the books, mostly editions of the classics and an odd assortment of prayer-books. One of these latter was

printed by Bentham for the University of Cambridge in 1764 ; another bore the name of John Baskerville. A few volumes in their coverings of dirty yellow vellum, ink-stained and torn, were from the famous Elzevirian press at Amsterdam. Cedric picked up a volume of Churchill's poems—'The Book of Joanna Westcott' had been written across the title-page. He put down the book, gave a look at the old man, who never moved from his position, and passed on. Did the old man come here every week with his score of books ? Did anyone buy them ? Were there people in Archester who cared for these relics of the past ? Cedric waited awhile to see whether the old bookseller had any customers, but none came, and he walked back to the other corner of the square.

'Good-morning, Mr. Readham,' said a voice behind him.

Cedric turned to see Olive Ranger.

'I'm marketing,' said she ; 'I haven't bought anything, but I'm watching the people.'

Cedric did not attempt to conceal the pleasure he felt at meeting her.

'So you were able to come over to-day !' she continued.

'Yes ; I thought my work could wait ; and, you see, you are making such a short stay ; I couldn't lose my opportunities.'

'Have you seen Mr. Lacey to-day ?' Olive went on. They had begun to walk away together.

'No ; I've only just come.'

There was a little pause. 'Well, as we are going towards my rooms, would you care to come in ?' She spoke almost shyly.

'I should like nothing better, Miss Ranger.'

'I could give you lunch.'

'Well, really . . .'

'Then, that's all right,' laughed Olive. 'I never stand on any ceremony. You must just take what there happens to be. I have a very curious landlady who once had a husband. I expect you will hear a good deal about that husband.'

They came to Hill Street, and went into a little house in which Olive seemed oddly out of place. The landlady, while she unburdened her heavy soul of a stock of anecdotes relating to her late partner of sainted memory—*vide* the churchyard—put cloth and plate upon the table, and ultimately produced a hot joint and vegetables. They sat down as naturally as though they had lunched in this fashion together every day for months. No mention was made of their meeting on the boat, but they discussed a host of things with a freedom which astonished Cedric afterwards when he reviewed the incidents of the day.

It was all so strange to him, this *à-la-carte* luncheon with a strange actress who was at one moment a girl, at the next a woman. Only, whilst they talked, they learned little enough of one another. The afternoon passed quickly. If Olive was in her way a mystery to him, she on her part found that there was something unknown to her in this handsome man, to whom she had first spoken on the preceding day. But that they enjoyed those few hours there could be no doubt, and when she proposed that Miss Gormaston's tea-party should proceed without the benefit of their company, and Cedric congratulated her upon the sensibility of her suggestion, she was inclined to think that of all men Mr. Readham appeared to satisfy most of her ideals, such as they were. Under the double influence

of her theatrical success and his appearance, she forgot any London ties, and prepared to enjoy her stay in Archester as fully as possible.

He saw her the next day. Lacey, he learnt, was gone to London—called away unexpectedly, Olive said.

As they sat together in the little room in Hill Street, their talk became imperceptibly more personal. She learnt that he was a Cambridge man, and told him an amusing tale of the infatuation of a 'boy' there, which had led to all sorts of punishments, the nature of which she could not pretend to understand. She told him that her father, long since dead, had been schoolmaster in a little Kentish village. She mentioned her former manager, Robinson, and compared him with Mr. Davenport, whom she regarded as 'decent enough, but too flabby.' Cedric talked without restraint, Olive chattered of all things; they might have been two children. Then Lord Sothernmere's name was mentioned.

'I am grateful to him for many things,' she said. 'He introduced me to Mr. Lacey. They are great friends.'

'I don't know Lord Sothernmere,' said Cedric; and he spoke stiffly. He was annoyed that the peer's name had been brought into their conversation. It had not been in the best of taste. Olive understood that mention of Sothernmere's name was temporarily placing a barrier between them, yet she had uttered his name with a purpose. It appeared to her almost necessary that Cedric should know of him, of her indebtedness to him, hateful though a recital of the facts might be to both of them. Yet Cedric would hardly listen. He was losing himself in a labyrinth that increased in interest and fascination as it grew more

and more bewildering. This woman was exciting in his breast new ideas, new passions. There was something deliciously frank in her behaviour. It was as though he were once again amongst the 'Openhearts,' able to say what he pleased, able to speak without fear of offence. Yet, as he walked home, he did not analyze his own emotions in the old way ; he was in the midst of what promised to be an adventure of a peculiar kind, and that seemed enough.

He came to Archester on the next day, and the next. Lady Cardellan was helpless, Mrs. Puddock wrathful. A hussy, declared the latter, was at the bottom of affairs. Cedric's presence at the theatre every night, both in front of the house and behind the footlights, was noted by more than one member of Mr. Davenport's company. Little Miss Featherstone whispered various condemnatory opinions about Olive to as many as would listen to her. Mr. Throstle winked at Mr. Pilling with more than his usual frequency. Mr. Topham indulged in sundry platitudes, and made allusions to a red motor-car. Yet it must be admitted that everyone to whom Cedric was introduced in that week was ready to admit in private that the curious gentleman, who seemed so unlike the usual theatrical camp-follower, was 'as good a sort as was wanted.' He stood drinks with commendable frequency ; he flattered in such subtle fashion as to convince the company at once of the truth of his remarks and his great powers as a critic. It was whispered that he wrote himself, and was a millionaire. Miss Gormaston in particular was eager to claim him as her especial friend. Miss Featherstone, on learning that Lord Loughton was his uncle and Lady Cardellan of Chipton Hall his aunt, endeavoured to show that she was prepared to be his

slave if necessary, and only regretted that it was Olive Ranger rather than herself who appeared to have such powers of attraction for the aristocracy.

The last day of the week saw a snow-storm come down from Ganton Hill, and a mantle of white clothed the country, deadening all sounds and making the roads—Chipton Lane in particular—difficult both to horse and pedestrian ; but Cedric tramped over to the town, and the four miles seemed nothing to him.

Once inside the house in Hill Street, he went straight up to Olive and kissed her on the lips, and the kiss was like no kiss of the past. Her success as Charlotte meant nothing much to her now ; she could afford to laugh at the petty jealousies of Miss Gormaston. After the second night she had been acting for him. He had come suddenly into her life, and something was already warning her not to let him go out of it. She had known this before he had appeared this morning. It had been different with the other men ; she had liked them, she supposed, for their very manhood—she liked Cedric for himself. And she had grown frightened when thoughts of Sothernmere had filled her mind. A letter bringing news that he would come to Borthampton on the following Monday or Tuesday had come by the first post. She understood how thankful she was that business affairs had kept him in London over this week. Cedric, she felt, already disliked him. ‘ And yet I think I like him,’ she had told herself ; ‘ he is so kind, has been so good to me.’ He loved her in his way, too, Olive thought, and women can sometimes love a man’s passion if they cannot love the man. There were ties which bound her to this man, ties which had taken her to Ostend, which had given her success on the stage. For the first time in her life

she thought of the future—a future without the man who already meant much to her.

‘What’s the matter, Olive?’ Cedric was lighting a cigarette. ‘You look tired and worried.’

‘Oh, nothing; I suppose I am tired.’

‘Well, you mustn’t be tired on your last day here. You go to-morrow at ten, don’t you?’

Olive nodded, a rueful look on her face.

‘I shall come to Borthampton.’

Olive laughed nervously. ‘I expect to see other people there.’

‘Which means to say you do not want to see me?’

She looked almost scared. ‘Lord Sothernmere is coming.’

‘Oh, damn Sothernmere!’ said Cedric cheerfully.

‘But you don’t like him!’

‘And you are afraid of him,’ Cedric retorted. ‘Is he so terrifying, then?’

‘You don’t understand,’ began Olive.

‘Oh yes, I do. He has done you some good turns.’ He became serious. ‘Now, I don’t want to beat about the bush at all. It isn’t necessary; we know each other pretty well now. I understand everything. I saw you with Sothernmere in Ostend, but that is no bar against my seeing you now. You must not be afraid, and think that you are running into all kinds of dangers. You are doing nothing of the sort. From what I hear of Lord Sothernmere, he is a very—what shall I say?—a very fickle creature. He does not propose to attach himself permanently to Davenport’s company, does he?’

‘I don’t know what he will do. He is so curious, but he has been so kind, so . . .’

She did not finish her sentence. There was a long

pause. Cedric was about to speak, when Mrs. Pluck, the landlady, armed with a tablecloth, and incidentally with a fresh batch of reminiscences, made her appearance.

Her entrance was inopportune. At luncheon Olive did not venture to speak of many things about which doubts had arisen in her mind. Cedric appeared in the best of spirits. He chatted and laughed, at one moment joking at the expense of Mrs. Pluck or Mr. Pilling, a gentleman who evidently worshipped Olive from a distance ; at another talking seriously of men he had met, of novels, of a hundred different things as they occurred to him. He felt that he was being appreciated. The hermit's cloak had been doffed. A damper came, however, in the shape of Miss Featherstone a few minutes after Mrs. Pluck had cleared away the remains of luncheon. Olive, sitting back in a lounge chair, was idly puffing at a cigarette, and looking across the room at Cedric, who had settled himself at full length on a sofa by the window. He appeared well satisfied with the world in general and himself in particular. One might have thought that the room was his own. He was evidently at home. But they were rudely awakened from pleasant visions by the reappearance of Mrs. Pluck.

'Miss Featherstone has called to see you, miss,' said she.

Cedric rose hurriedly from the sofa.

'What the deuce can she want ?' he asked.

'Probably nothing at all,' said Olive ; 'what am I to do ?'

'She says as it's important,' observed Mrs. Pluck.

'Look here,' exclaimed Cedric ; 'I don't want to see her.'

'But I suppose I ought to. What a nuisance !

You had better bring her up, Mrs. Pluck. She may not stay for long.'

'She do talk,' remarked the landlady, with a chuckle, 'don't she just?'

'She does,' agreed Cedric, smiling in spite of himself.

A moment later Miss Featherstone, with snow about her, rustled into the room. A look of intense satisfaction came over her face when she espied Cedric.

'Oh, dear Miss Ranger, I do hope you will excuse me calling at this hour, and in such a state—it is still trying to snow—but to tell you the truth I am in great difficulty about something. Good-afternoon, Mr. Readham. How nice to see you again! Shall we see you at the theatre to-night? Our last night, you know, so you must come. We go away quite early to-morrow, and our real tour begins at Borthampton. Do you know old Lord Borthampton by any chance, Mr. Readham? I wonder if he lives there. They don't always, you know,' she added vaguely.

'Some difficulty, Miss Featherstone?' queried Olive, feigning an interest she was far from feeling. Cedric had taken up a standing position in front of the mantelpiece.

'I should think so,' cried Miss Featherstone, playing with the gold chain-bag which invariably accompanied her. 'It is an awful business; I don't really know which way to turn. That is why I have come round to you. I thought you would excuse my troubling you. It is such a nuisance being in a place where one knows nobody at all. I really don't know a soul here, Mr. Readham. Fancy, not a soul! But, then, nobody one knows would live here, would they? It is such a funny place. Of course, it will be very different at Borthampton, where one knows such a lot of people.'

The Ashby-Parkyns live there. Do you know them, Miss Ranger ? Such nice people. Their aunt married the Honourable Mr. Tenbymount. I don't know him, curiously enough, though they tell me he is a trifle fast. Such a pity, I always think. Mrs. Ashby-Parkyns told me about poor Sir Thomas's scandal. Of course, you know all about it, Mr. Readham ?'

Cedric shook his head. How preposterous she was ! It was perfectly obvious, however, that she was beset with no grave difficulty. Her visit to Hill Street had been prompted by nothing more than a desire to see if he himself happened to be with Olive Ranger. Her curiosity deserved something besides satisfaction, he told himself ; it merited punishment, and yet he did not think she would take a snub. He could see that Olive was anything but pleased at Miss Featherstone's chatter, and had already seen through her manœuvres ; but there seemed no remedy. He saw that she had prepared herself to listen with as good a grace as could be assumed to a string of dull anecdotes about people whom no one but Miss Featherstone knew or would care to know. They attended to a dreary catalogue of petty wrongdoings attributed to a wealthy knight, whose only claim to notoriety apparently lay in the totally uninteresting fact of his being acquainted with Mrs. Ashby-Parkyns. Olive was hoping that her unwelcome visitor had found out as much as she could have hoped to learn, and would soon depart—it seemed, indeed, that Miss Featherstone was becoming slightly exhausted—when there was a loud knock at the front-door. The little actress started in her chair.

'Mr. Fenton's knock,' she cried ; 'I know it quite well. He often comes to see me. We shall be quite a merry little party.'

Mr. Fenton was ushered in. A little snow still stuck to his trousers, but he had wiped his boots carefully. He was a taciturn person, very slow when he did speak, very painstaking with his work, very reserved on all occasions. He made his call on Miss Ranger because he considered that the visit was required of him. In his pocket lay a little book, in which was tabulated a list of names of people with whom he was acquainted. Most of his afternoons, whether he happened to be in London or in the provinces, were taken up in protracted visits to these people, when he would discuss the weather or the condition of the present-day drama, and drink a cup of tea without allowing a smile to illumine his countenance.

‘How nice of you to come, Mr. Fenton!’ exclaimed Olive. She was playing the hostess well, but Cedric could see with what a severe effort.

Mr. Fenton shook hands with everyone, remarked on the oddity of having market-day on any but a Saturday, and sat down. Miss Featherstone continued to monopolize the conversation. Apparently the enlarging of her audience recouped her powers. Cedric became so disgusted at last that he was goaded into an observation that the people about whom she was speaking must be dreadful outsiders.

‘My dear Mr. Readham,’ exclaimed Miss Featherstone, shocked; ‘they are a baronet’s family!’

Cedric kept his face with difficulty, but his remark stopped the flow of scandal for a time. Mr. Fenton took advantage of the momentary pause to make his fourth remark.

‘Pinero,’ he observed, apropos of nothing whatever, ‘should be more careful about his third acts.’

Mrs. Pluck brought in tea.

Cedric left after he had drunk his tea. Two and a half hours, he felt, had been wasted. He showered curses on Fenton and Miss Featherstone. Olive had evidently been surprised when he had suddenly risen to take his departure. Well, he would see her at the theatre, and have supper at Hill Street. They could talk then without fear of interruption. He walked down to the half-deserted market-place. There might be trouble with Sothernmere, he reflected. Things might be devilishly awkward. He shrugged his shoulders. The more awkward things might turn out to be, the better he would be pleased. It would merely add to the interest of the adventure. And, after all, Olive was surely able to do what she pleased.

These six days had seen a great change come over him. He had stepped boldly out into a new bypath, and the road was proving a smooth one. He thought of Manning. How amazed dear old Tom would be could he see him playing the fool like this in Archester! Was he playing the fool? On a sudden he altered his direction, and walked away up towards the station. He was to dine at the hotel. The waiter greeted him with a low bow. This new customer was handsome with his tips. Cedric ordered a bottle of champagne.

The theatre was crowded that night, and Cedric thought that Olive had never acted so well.

Outside the snow was still falling in thick flakes.

'I've ordered a carriage,' said Cedric, buttoning up his coat. He was standing in the doorway of one of the dressing-rooms. 'Come along. Good-night, Mr. Davenport.' He helped Olive into the old-fashioned fly with its shabby seats, and they were driven to Hill Street.

Mrs. Pluck had surpassed herself. A sumptuous meal was spread on the table. Cedric had given her tickets for the theatre a night or two ago, and she was very willing to give him of her best. Perhaps she had wondered in the past at the morals of her various theatrical lodgers, but nothing surprised her now, and she regarded Cedric's visits as the most natural occurrences in the world. Her one weakness lay in a constant desire to lay bare her own blameless past. Whatever her lodgers might do, short of pulling her house to pieces, as had nearly been the case in one instance, so long as they paid their bills with punctuality, was hardly a matter that came into her consideration.

'How unkind of you to leave me!' said Olive.

'I thought I'd better clear out. There's no saying what that little cat may say as it is. It's so easy to be rude to people of her kind. We shan't be interrupted now, so it doesn't matter.' He was holding her hand. 'Sorry the week's over, Olive?'

'But it is to be the first of others, isn't it?' She spoke anxiously.

'Of course. Kiss me, Olive.'

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH MISS FEATHERSTONE PLAYS A NOT UNIMPORTANT PART

‘If you have no great objection,’ said Lacey, ‘I’ll come down with you to Borthampton to-morrow.’

‘Come down with me?’ said Sothernmere in surprise; ‘are you wanted there?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘Then why on earth come? You don’t expect I should be going into a God-forsaken place like Borthampton if it weren’t for Olive, do you?’

‘Certainly not. I know you far too well.’

‘Then why go?’

‘I’ve nothing else to do. I’ve finished with business and work for a bit, and want a holiday.’

‘Oh, come if you want to.’ Sothernmere spoke a trifle ungraciously.

‘I shan’t be in the way, shall I?’ continued Lacey, looking at an amber cigarette-holder which he was fingering.

The other laughed. ‘I’ll see to that, old man,’ said he.

‘Very well, then; if you will call for me on the car to-morrow—provided, of course, that you do not appear at some absurd hour before the day has broken, or at any rate is proceeding to break in the dear old

way—I shall be ready, valise packed, myself begoggled, behatted, and all the rest of it.'

Lacey would have found it difficult to say whether his proposal to accompany his friend to Borthampton had followed on a desire to see more of Olive Ranger, who interested him, or from an estimable wish to keep Sothernmere more or less under his control—the paternal element was strong in the dramatist—or from the knowledge that his own presence in Borthampton would be the means of causing some slight flutter in that city's social and theatrical circles. There was no denying the popularity which any town, village, or hamlet where his work was known accorded him. To the middle classes Arthur Lacey was unquestionably 'a great man.' Amongst the London sets in which he moved he enjoyed the occupation of a certain status as author of several charming comedies; with the provincials it was rather a different matter, for out of London people knew him only as 'the eminent dramatist about whom everyone talked,' and were very ready with their worship. And Lacey saw no objection whatever in playing the hero in real life to large audiences. He liked what he called provincial praise. It was, he had once said, that form of flattery which gave one the impression of being a debt rather than a present. 'Besides,' he had added, 'I learn such a lot about myself, and that, of course, is one's real education.' In the presence of scholars such as Winnington Orley and his kind, who apparently could not descend to a discussion on the trivialities of life, Lacey felt himself to be no more than one of many. With this honest middle class which lived in Borthampton and in Birmingham, and in places which he grouped together under the title of 'centres,' he was a shining

light, and nothing was more agreeable to his taste than the part of 'distinguished visitor.' So it might be supposed with some reason that his determination to go out of London with Sothernmere followed on a desire to taste once more for a little time such agreeable pleasures as he knew would be his on the fact of his presence in Borthampton becoming known.

Sothernmere, disguised beneath furs and leather coverings to hands and face, stalked into the dramatist's room at an early hour on the following morning.

'Coming?'

'Certainly. There we have our baggage, there protections for the body, here ourselves. My esteemed valet has already departed upon a visit to his aunt or somebody. He is singularly rich in aunts for a valet.'

'Well, come along. As it is, we shan't arrive till three.'

They went downstairs, where the red car stood. A small crowd was collecting round it, and watched with interest the elaborate precautions for comfort which Lacey was at no small pains to take. A butcher-boy set up a faint cheer as the car moved off, and remarked ecstatically on the general appearance of the 'turn-out' to a companion who had temporarily brought his heavily-laden tricycle to a standstill. 'Better nor yours, Bill,' said the butcher-boy. 'Bigger,' retorted the tricycle-boy, 'but mine doan't bust up so orfen.'

The journey to Borthampton, in spite of this remark, was performed without mishap. Lacey stepped into his hotel hungry and half-numbed with cold. Sothernmere was excited, and in what was for him a remarkably even temper. He forgot to treat the hotel's resident engineer — whilom its ostler — with his customary sharpness and rough manner. He was genial enough

to agree with the manager that a hot lunch could not be placed upon the table for a few minutes, and indulged in a wash with a smile playing upon his countenance. The run from London had put him in the best of spirits. That confounded business which had kept him in the vicinity of the Law Courts for more than a week was now over, and he had seen the last of the scoundrelly lawyers and their kind. Once again he was free to enjoy himself in any way his fancy might dictate. Olive was in the town, and expected him that evening. The prospect was wholly pleasurable, and any idea that Lacey had come down in order to play 'heavy father' had been dispelled from his mind. Sothernmere had before now accused his friend of practising that unfair game upon himself, conveniently forgetting what the consequences might have been had Lacey been elsewhere at certain crucial moments in his own career. At the present juncture, however, he was at peace with the world—a state of being which meant that no unpleasant thoughts could be entertained for a moment.

The luncheon over, Sothernmere excused himself, and walked to the address which Olive had sent him on the previous day. He found her alone reading a novel.

'Hullo, Olive!' was his greeting. 'I've got away at last. Never had such a time in my life. I was simply badgered by everyone—judges, solicitors, all sorts of ghastly people with long faces. Dear little girl, it's worth going through all that sort of rot in the Law Courts to have the pleasure of coming down here and seeing you. But what a rotten room! Is this the best you could find?'

Olive laughed. She let him kiss her as usual. She had greeted him in the old way. Perhaps she was glad

now that he had come. In a sense it relieved the tension of things. 'Tea?'

'I've just had lunch. No, I don't want tea. I want you. What sort of a week did you have?'

'It was all right, dear. I was a great success as Charlotte. I wonder how you will like me to-night. Mr. Lacey was pleased.'

'He's here,' said Sothernmere, sitting on the arm of her chair.

'Mr. Lacey here?' cried Olive in surprise. She knew instinctively that his presence complicated matters, though in what way she could not have said.

'Yes. Now put your arms round me, Olive . . . so . . . do let's be comfortable. You can't imagine what a week I have had.'

For a little while she suffered herself to do as he asked; then she pushed him away, got up from her chair, and walked over to the fireplace. 'I've got a little headache,' she pleaded.

'Poor little girl! I'll be the doctor and kiss it away.'

She shook her head.

'I'd rather you didn't now,' she said. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'Mind? Damn it, of course I mind.' Such feminine complaints as headaches and the like were, to say the least of it, annoying to him. When he was with Olive he expected, and had so far obtained, complete surrender to his wishes. 'Now I'm going to kiss you,' he added. 'Come here, and the headache will go. You'll forget all about it.' He led her back to the chair.

It was difficult to know what was to be done. Olive understood now in what a different way she was looking upon Sothernmere. How was she to tell him

that for the future life for her was not going to lie in the old grooves ? A man who was different from other men had come into her life, and she was experiencing new emotions—emotions which she had hitherto seen only on the stage, and even there but crudely represented. How was she to make him understand that something had happened to herself ? The task seemed well-nigh impossible. She passively allowed him to press her close to himself. Against her will she was his for the time. He lifted her up, and took her in his arms.

Of all evils perhaps procrastination is the most alluring. There is so often the hope that something may intervene to make a seeming necessity superfluous. Olive had wondered whether she would be able to tell Sothernmere the truth at their first meeting. Now she was sure she could not. This man, selfish, headstrong, none too particular where his honour was concerned, as she knew him to be, loved her in his way, and had been kind ; and she was vaguely frightened of him. Before Cedric had come to her at Archester it had been she who had held him in sway ; now she felt herself to be a subject of his. A new cowardice, she thought, had come into her nature with that which she supposed was love.

‘ Is there anything up besides this headache, Olive ? ’ he asked a little later. ‘ Hang it, you’re simply as still as a dead woman, and I haven’t seen you for about ten days.’

‘ I’m very sorry ; I shall be all right to-night. Let me rest quietly now, and meet me again at the theatre.’

Sothernmere stared at her. ‘ You mean me to go ? ’ Such behaviour on her part was inexplicable, he thought. But she did look tired, poor thing ! He

decided to be magnanimous, to give up for a time his own pleasure, and let her be alone. The idea of his own unselfishness pleased him. It would, he reflected, make supper with Olive so much more attractive. 'All right, old girl; I can see you want to be alone before the theatre. I'll go. D'you want anything sending in?'

'No, thanks. I would have sent a message to the hotel . . .'

'But you didn't want to disappoint me,' Sothernmere finished for her. 'Well, I'll go. Olive, you're a witch when you open those eyes of yours—sort of eyes they are that Lacey would say had poetry in them. He's always talking nonsense of that sort, and thinks I like it.' He laughed rather boisterously. 'Good-bye, Olive; you see I am going.'

He went out with his mind full of his own splendid sacrifice. Fancy leaving a woman to see whom he had travelled over a hundred miles, because she was suffering from nothing worse than a headache which was probably largely 'make-believe'! What nobility of mind! Sothernmere arrived at the hotel with the idea that unselfishness reaped an immediate reward firmly fixed in his brain. Perhaps it was the first occasion upon which he had put the consideration of others before his own inclinations; but it is just possible that Olive's unusual passivity had suggested that his most advisable course lay in waiting until that objectionable state had passed off, and she was once again the old Olive with whom he liked to think himself so much in love.

The following morning Lacey discovered that something had happened to disturb the good spirits of his friend. Breakfast had not passed without a display

on his lordship's part of sudden eccentricities of conduct, of the meaning of which the dramatist was only too well aware. The manager of the hotel had been summoned about such a trivial matter as an egg not cooked to Sothernmere's liking. A denunciation of Borthampton's food in general, and the hotel's fare in particular was hurled at the unfortunate man's head, to the great amusement of the other occupants of the room. Lacey, as so often before, endeavoured to make peace by appearing to take his friend's part, when he was in reality assuring the manager that any mistake there might have been either with eggs or any other article of food was no more than might have been expected in a place where his lordship's particular palate was not known. As the hours passed, however, Sothernmere became more and more untractable. At one moment he was the unreasoning child who, debarred from the fulfilment of some whim, expresses its resentment in no silent terms ; at another he was the cynic, coarse in his language, bitter against everyone, including Lacey, whom he accused of numerous attempts to stand in his way. Lacey, in fact, was so seriously alarmed that, after the manner of the doctors, he ordered a walk for them both which should occupy not less than two hours.

'Seven miles,' he said, with a Harley-Street air, 'should do wonders, my dear sir, for you.'

Sothernmere growled unintelligibly.

'The spleen,' explained Lacey calmly, 'is a terrible business if it does not get its seven miles. Now, come out, and don't be absurd.' Sothernmere followed him out of the hotel with something of the whipped hound about him.

They had not gone far before Miss Featherstone came

running across the road towards them. The chain-bag swung from side to side as she ran. She greeted the two men with effusion. It had hardly been difficult to obtain an introduction to the Earl of Sothernmere in London, when the red car belonging to that nobleman had appeared with such regularity outside their place of rehearsal, and to Miss Featherstone one shake of the hand meant, if need be, a very intimate friendship.

‘Good-morning, Lord Sothernmere,’ she cried gaily. ‘How do you do? Isn’t it a beautiful morning? And how very nice to see you again, Mr. Lacey! My friend, Mrs. Ashby-Parkyns—she lives here, you know—was asking after you only yesterday. She is so anxious to meet you. Don’t you think Miss Ranger was good last night, Lord Sothernmere? I think we have improved very much all round. Of course, Archester did that. I was really thankful to get away from the place. You can’t imagine, Lord Sothernmere, how dull it was—except, of course, our meeting Mr. Readham. I like him so much.’ She paused to take breath. Lacey stood rather bewildered. It was always rather difficult to get away from Miss Featherstone.

‘Readham?’ said Sothernmere; ‘who’s he?’

‘A very nice man,’ Lacey told him. ‘I met him at the Sheridans’.

‘Such a handsome man, I think,’ continued Miss Featherstone, watching Sothernmere closely. ‘He and Miss Ranger got on splendidly together. He really made the week quite entertaining. But of course I didn’t see much of him. You see, Mr. Lacey left us so hurriedly, and Mr. Davenport was so busy that we had practically no one to talk to. Then Mr. Readham

came . . . oh ! and he's here too. I saw him at the theatre on Monday.'

'Here ?' repeated Lacey, a little startled.

'Oh yes.' Miss Featherstone was delighted to be the bearer of what she thought must prove very important news. She could disapprove of Miss Ranger very strongly indeed, the while her interest in that lady's most private affairs was of the keenest possible nature. 'I think he told me that we should see him again to-day. I am sure you would like him, Lord Sothernmere.'

They got rid of her by the very simple process of Sothernmere holding out his hand.

'I'm off to Olive,' said he to Lacey, when the astonished actress had been so summarily dismissed, before, indeed, she had been able to take full advantage of her opportunity of imparting such pleasant information.

Lacey shrugged his shoulders. Amusement and anxiety were struggling for supremacy within him. He left Sothernmere to call upon an acquaintance. What a curiously unpleasant creature Miss Featherstone was, he reflected, and how much worse than Miss Gormaston, who invariably tried to proceed to very dangerous lengths in the art of flirtation with little or no encouragement from the victim ! It was a matter for self-congratulation, he thought, that he had never considered marriage from a serious point of view.

Sothernmere hurried off to Olive's rooms. He burst in unceremoniously. He saw a tall man, with fair hair and strikingly handsome features standing by the fireplace, a cigarette between his lips, his hands in his pockets. Olive was not in the room.

'Do you want Miss Ranger ?'

'Yes. Isn't she here ?' blustered Sothernmere.

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The other shook his head. 'No,' said he ; 'will you wait ?'

Sothernmere was thoroughly exasperated, but something in the man's face warned him that it would be better to keep to himself the curses which he desired to bestow upon people in general. He sat down on a chair and waited. He was even persuaded to accept a cigarette from the other man's case.

CHAPTER XVI

THIN BREAD-AND-BUTTER

FROM nine in the morning until noon Dr. Winnington Orley was accustomed to devote himself to his correspondence, a careful perusal of the *Times*, and any matters concerning his bachelor establishment which his housekeeper chose to bring before his notice. His correspondence was large, but he saw few people. He lived on the outskirts of London in a house which had once belonged to a famous Victorian novelist. Most of the few visitors who ever ventured inside his little home were the children of neighbours, who themselves knew him only by sight. Winnington Orley was fond of children, perhaps because he was so fond of fairyland and the literature which had arisen round that mysterious place. He and his little friends, few of whom had reached a greater age than nine, or at most ten, when they would in a generality of cases degenerate into ordinary and uninteresting mortals very hostile to their former playgrounds, would play about together in his tiny garden and 'explore.'

What child has not explored? Who does not know the delights of distant travels performed within the precincts of the nursery, or of perilous journeys beyond the bounds of civilization carried out in the garden? A cupboard into which one can squeeze

oneself becomes an enchanted castle with its walls of pure gold ; a bed of ferns is some Eastern forest ; the very insects are metamorphosed into deadly serpents. Who has not hidden beneath the parental quilt or counterpane, and been thereby transported on some magic carpet to strange lands ? And Winnington Orley, despite his sixty years, still liked to romp with his little friends. His garden, with its high walls and the large ferns which he had planted with his own hands, was still the forest of childhood to him. It had rather a wild appearance. He was his own gardener, and he hated anything approaching tidiness or regularity. From his study he could look upon the garden with its strange flowers and the little nooks and huts which he had constructed at one time or another. The pen would often slip from his hand as his eyes rested on the various clumps of flowers and shrubs, or on the tall elms which stood like so many sentinels round the edge of his little paradise. It was in the presence of these children that the thinker became once again the child. Men called him boorish, his habits in society abominable, but they had not seen him in his own home. Here he was ready to sympathize with all his child-friends in their petty worries, ready to play the kind uncle and dispense delicious tea-cake and beautifully thin bread-and-butter, of that kind known as 'drawing-room-cut,' in contradistinction to another far less appetizing sort peculiar to the nursery. Here he was gently kind—the dear old lovable enchanter, as the children called him. Only Mrs. Sheridan and a few others knew that side of his character.

One morning in the spring he was glancing through his letters, when he came across one from Miss Ruth

Sheridan. Now, ten years ago Ruth had been one of the most frequently invited guests to the little house with its guardian elms, which had, of course, once been princes ; but she had grown too big for the tea-parties speedily enough, and the glamour round her had in time disappeared. In a sense, however, she was still the little glory-child who had been with him, and his godchild—as, indeed, she was—interested him more than did any other ‘grown-up.’ He read her letter, and stared through the open window. So Miss Ruth was coming to tea that afternoon, and demanded thin bread-and-butter ! Well, he would be glad to see her. It must be several months since he had been to the Sheridans’ house, but he had been very busy throughout the winter. His new book had occupied every minute of his time. He put down the letter and read his paper.

Ruth arrived about four o’clock. Her godfather, in the old grey suit which had done duty for so many years, received her in the arm-chair, where she had sat and listened in the past to so many wonderful stories. She kissed him on the forehead—that being, as she had once remarked, the only place where one could kiss him—and sat down on a chair which faced his own.

‘You don’t look well, Ruth,’ he remarked.

Ruth had taken off her jacket and was playing with a bracelet. ‘I suppose that is because the body has not been attended to very regularly of late. I have been dosing the mind instead.’

‘What ! are the days of tomboydom definitely over now ? The last time I saw your mother she told me that you were seriously thinking of starting a ladies’ football club. Your father heard the remark and talked of sending you to a convent.’

'Father is so stupid at times,' exclaimed the girl, a sudden look of anger showing itself on her face. 'He is one of those men who don't, who can't, understand things. I don't want to say things against him, but he is so blind to all reason and so utterly bound down by antiquated codes, that one wants to . . . oh, to take no notice of him ; and those religious fads of his—you know what they are.' She paused.

Dr. Orley nodded, but waited until he had heard something more definite before venturing to offer sympathy or advice. This threatened to be a Ruth of whom he knew little. Her growth, he was inclined to think, had hardly been regular. It had been a little difficult to follow the different steps. Now she seemed strangely altered. The child in her had, as it were, evaporated away, and yet, he remembered, she had asked for thin bread-and-butter. So, perhaps, she wanted him to treat her still as a child. He nodded again, this time keeping his head sunk upon his breast. The bushy eyebrows touched his grey hair, whilst his eyes were fixed upon his god-daughter. Ruth was still playing with the bracelet.

'Mother sent her love,' she said abruptly.

Dr. Orley's smile was hidden beneath his beard.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Why didn't she come with you?'

'Because you know you hate having visitors.'

'I thought you knew that I made exceptions.'

Ruth looked up and uttered a little laugh. 'Well, I wanted to see you alone,' she owned.

'Ah ! that is better.' Winnington Orley's beard shot up from his chest. The eyebrows resumed their normal position ; the tips of his long, thin fingers touched one another to make an arch in front of him. 'Well ?' said he.

There was a long pause.

'What made you write that chapter on marriage in your last book?' she asked at last.

Her godfather started.

'What an odd question, Ruth!'

'Somebody glorified your life once, didn't she?'

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Winnington Orley.

'Didn't she?' persisted Ruth.

'Heaps of people have glorified my life—all my friends...'

Ruth interrupted him. 'No; I mean the one who made you come to this dear old place and live alone.'

'Why do you ask me all this?'

'Because someone wants to marry me.'

'And do you want to marry him?'

'Not in the least.'

They looked at one another and burst out laughing.

'Then, where is your difficulty? I presume you have one, or you would not be putting extraordinary questions to me.'

'Do you know the Bishop of Bayswater?'

Winnington Orley shook his head. 'No, I do not know him. Is he the...?'

'No, he is not, thank goodness! But he has a great influence over father, and apparently he has been telling him that early marriages are not such heinous affairs as my poor deluded parent would like to think. The result is that he has taken it into his head to give delicate hints that I should marry Jack.'

'And who in the world is Jack?'

'Jack is a friend of ours—the curate of our parish. Oh, he is one of my best friends. I like him awfully, and just lately he has been especially nice to me.'

'And, I suppose, has asked you to marry him?'

'Precisely,' replied Ruth in such comical tones as caused her godfather to laugh heartily. But he became grave in a moment.

'And this is what you have come to see me about?'

'Yes.'

'Does your mother know anything about it?'

'Not yet.'

'Then why come to me before asking her advice?'

'Because,' said Ruth slowly, 'you wrote that chapter.'

Dr. Orley shrugged his shoulders. 'What of it?' he asked.

'It was very different from the others in the book, wasn't it?' She spoke a little unevenly.

Winnington Orley admitted the fact. 'Now, suppose you tell me what exactly is the matter. I am your godfather, so I must know everything.'

'Well, you see,' Ruth went on nervously,—'you don't mind if I talk to you as if we were . . . were of the same age?'

'No, no.'

'We both . . . we both, both of us . . .'

Winnington Orley got up from his chair. He went up to Ruth and took her hands in his own. 'Now, dear,' he said in the soft tones that were so rarely heard outside his own home, 'I see I've got to look upon you as my little girl. You think you have found life's other fairyland, just as I thought I had once?'

Ruth showed him a tearful face. 'I loved a man,' she said, 'who was just . . . just an actor—a man with nothing to do but amuse himself at other people's expense. Perhaps you think I only flirted—perhaps you think I don't know what love means. My father

certainly would not credit me with more than a child's emotions.' She broke off. 'So, am I to play vicar's wife and hypocrite into the bargain, or am I to go and . . . ?'

'And what ?' asked Winnington Orley, his hands still clasping hers.

'Oh, I don't hope now,' Ruth went on passionately. 'I can't hope, yet I like to look back. If I married Jack I couldn't do that, could I ?'

'You cannot hope, Ruth ?'

'Did you ?' asked the girl, and Winnington Orley turned away his head.

There was a knock at the door, and the housekeeper, bearing a tray with the thin bread-and-butter, and the same sort of cake which Ruth remembered never to have seen elsewhere, made her appearance.

'Good afternoon,' said she ; 'and how's your dear mother, Miss Ruth ? It's many a long day since you were here.'

'It is, Mrs. Barlow. I miss nothing more than your cakes.'

Mrs. Barlow launched into a series of questions, the answers to which she did not wait to hear, whilst Winnington Orley was looking at one of his book-cases and letting Ruth play hostess with the tea-things. He took down a copy of his own book and turned to that chapter which Ruth had mentioned. Had she, then, thrown love into the strange garden where no one wanted it ? Was this only another instance of that early tragedy in his own life, when he had thrown that little weed—that poor little weed—into the bed of roses, or was it that Ruth was still the girl with exaggerated ideas, fears, hopes, so common in her kind ? He remembered Ruth's mother, and did

not doubt that Ruth, like her, had put on the cloak of womanhood early. He read a passage which had often been quoted against him as unnecessary and sentimental. The book was replaced, and he took his cup of tea, and helped himself to the 'drawing-room-cut' bread-and-butter. There were tightenings at his throat as he looked at Ruth. Mrs. Barlow had gone out of the room.

'Yes, I hoped,' said he at last. 'If hope is prolonged, one's grief is all the shorter. Now drink up your tea, Ruth.' He spoke quickly. 'It is no use asking anyone's advice. You know what your own heart wants you to do. Time only can show what has really happened. You will think me very commonplace when I say that silver is but a poor substitute for gold. You can never be sure of the silver.' He helped himself to some cake. 'Ever read Coventry Patmore?' he continued. 'He wrote curious stuff; but some of it is fine. "In Divinity what's worth the saying can't be said." Now, don't let us discuss Divinity—you know my views; but don't let us discuss love—it is too sacred. Then he changed the subject, and Ruth asked no more questions.

When she left it was Winnington Orley who kissed her; usually it was he who submitted to the process.

CHAPTER XVII

A CERTAIN SUNDAY

ONE Sunday afternoon the drawing-room at 148 Tite Street looked emptier than was usual at tea-time on that day. Only some half-dozen people were there. The Bishop of Bayswater had presented himself at an early hour, and was now in earnest confabulation with Mr. Sheridan on a small sofa by the door. Professor Hernrodt, Miss Galston, and a certain young baronet who had lately entered the literary arena at no small expense to his pocket, sat round Mrs. Sheridan. Ruth, in a chair by her mother's side, was unusually silent. The Professor, but lately back from an Italian tour, was giving descriptions of some of the towns in Northern Italy. He spoke of Gaudenzio Ferrari with enthusiasm, citing that painter's work at the towns of Novara and Vercelli.

'Und dot reminds me, Mrs. Sheridan, dot I have seen Lord Loughton bod lately. Did I not sbeak mit 'iss nephew here last year?'

'Oh, Mr. Readham! Yes; we have seen nothing of him lately.'

'He went into the country, I think, to work,' added Ruth. 'May I get you another cup, Professor?'

'Bod yes, if you please. He was an agreeable young man. His uncle is—how do you call it?—a

mighty man . . . no, zat is not ze word . . . a man of pride. You undershtandt, Mrs. Sheridan ?'

'Oh yes.' She spoke the words quickly. Cedric's name was rarely mentioned in Tite Street now. The mother, perhaps, understood Ruth's feelings. Ruth had gone to the table and was refilling the Professor's cup.

'Ze Baroness Loughton,' continued Professor Hernrodt, 'is a woman 'oo sbeak gurious. I am leetle ofraid dot I haf her ovended.'

'And are you glad to be back again in London ?' asked Mrs. Sheridan.

'Bod yes. I am quite at home, und my dear friendt Henry Armitage, he iss so kind.'

'We have not seen him for such a time.'

The literary baronet moved his chair nearer to his hostess. Ruth came back to the Professor with his cup and a dish of cakes. A moment later Tom Manning came in. He greeted Mrs. Sheridan with a worried look on his face.

'I suppose you thought I had deserted you,' he began, attempting to seat himself in a chair by no means suited to one of his size. 'Of course I'm terribly rude. Good-afternoon, Ruth. Yes ; tea, please.'

Mrs. Sheridan inquired after Blanche.

Tom mentioned a hospital to which it appeared Blanche had gone, though he had to admit that to-day was not his wife's usual visiting day. There had been a slight disagreement about the hour of noon in Sloane Street, and Tom was not quite himself. He took his cup from Ruth, and busied himself with a spoon. The literary baronet was giving the company the benefit of his views upon the latest comedy, and, conscious of his own advantage in the matter of words, endeavoured to wrangle with the German professor over some

psychological point. Tom listened open-mouthed. His look fell on Ruth, who was talking to Jessie Galston. So she had not cared at all! That had been clear to the unfortunate Tom from the very time when Cedric had left London. That had been the reason why, after the second or third letter, all of them the results of more than an hour's painful wrestle with pen and paper, he had not troubled himself further in the match-making matter. And that, he reflected now, must be the reason why Blanche had of late been so queer. He had been greatly astonished to find that his wife had been forming some such designs as had been occupying his own brains. She had urged him to redouble his efforts to bring Cedric back, and he, somewhat to his own surprise perhaps, had refused to take further steps. It was all so useless, he had told himself, when both the people he wanted to help refused all aid.

'And the football, Mr. Manning?' He heard Mrs. Sheridan put the question.

'Yesterday? We won all right. I wounded somebody, I'm sorry to say, but he was such a . . . well, such a shrimp that one couldn't help it. But you never come to see us now!'

'Ruth is losing her interest in the game,' Mrs. Sheridan replied. 'I suppose she is getting too old.'

'Yes, much too antique,' rejoined Ruth. 'Jack was playing, wasn't he?'

Tom nodded. 'He nearly killed the shrimp, too. Most of us did, I fancy.' He looked round, and noted the delicate proportions of the baronet. 'Shrimps shouldn't be allowed to play,' he averred.

'Is schrimb a man who is coward?' inquired the Professor, always on the look-out for fresh examples of British slang.

Tom laughed heartily. 'It is a little beggar,' he explained. The Bishop of Bayswater came across the room, having performed his duty with Mr Sheridan. He caught a word of the Professor's query.

'Shrimps ?' he said. 'An excellent food.'

Mrs. Sheridan apologized for the absence of such a delicacy from her tea-table.

The conversation became general. The Bishop discussed poetry with the baronet, and talked of Whistler, with whom he had been personally acquainted. Mr. Sheridan, somewhat against his inclination, entered upon the time-worn subject of art for art's sake with Miss Galston, who, being of a mischievous disposition, desired to make him perform those verbal antics which she was wont to describe as 'floundering.' In former days Ruth had given her copies of each of Mr. Sheridan's pamphlets as they appeared, and many a laugh had been raised at the expense of their author. Mr. Sheridan was a little afraid of Miss Galston at all times, but more especially now, since he was in terror lest she should in some way shock his esteemed friend the Bishop of Bayswater with some more than usually scandalous utterance. But she allowed him to talk of his tracts, and pretended to be in need of sympathy, whereupon the whilom crusader launched forth into one continuous stream of rhetoric, which only collapsed when a burst of laughter from Tom led to the loss of that gentleman's balance. The result was a broken teacup and a chorus of voices expressing dismay, sympathy, and amusement. The Bishop was moved to a species of secular benediction, in which he deplored the decreasing interest in blue china. In a few minutes, however, the débris had been removed, and Tom, ensconced in a chair, suited, as the Bishop

took occasion to remark, to a Milo, rid himself of his blushes, and made an end to his apologies. To him a smashed cup, even though it might be made of china, and display on its surface certain curiously drawn figures in a blue colour, meant nothing more than a little extra work for the parlourmaid, and the necessity for apologies ; but he knew that Mrs. Sheridan put a value upon such things, and he felt almost as though a murder in miniature had been committed.

‘And that reminds me,’ said he. ‘I saw Arthur Lacey yesterday. He was talking about clumsiness. He said it was an art or not an art—I forget which. You know how difficult it is to understand what he means.’

‘He was dining with me the other night,’ said the young baronet.

‘And whom do you think he had seen ?’ continued Tom, still a little upset by the teacup incident, and forgetful of a former determination to say nothing to the Sheridans upon this particular point.

The company expressed a desire for enlightenment.

‘My friend Readham. He was hurrying through London, so it seems ; but I haven’t seen anything of him myself.’

The Bishop glanced at Mr. Sheridan ; but his host was engaged again with Miss Galston. For a moment there was an awkward pause, and Tom realized his own imprudence. But he had seen Ruth blush before she had turned away to Professor Hernrodt.

‘We see nothing of him now,’ remarked Mrs. Sheridan calmly. ‘But, then, how often that happens ! People come and go. I think we live in a world of coming and going.’

The Bishop observed that in the case of writers that

was often so. Mr. Readham, he believed, wrote novels.

‘I had heard so.’ Mrs. Sheridan spoke guardedly.

‘Well, I don’t expect we shall see him for some considerable time.’ Tom, without knowing it, removed an antimacassar from the chair he had been occupying at the time of the accident and wrapped it round his fingers.

‘He is a little hard to understand, Miss Galston,’ Mr. Sheridan was saying. ‘You should read the Bishop of Peterham’s *World of Opportunity*. Such an excellent book.’

Tom put back the antimacassar, and in a few minutes rose to go.

‘But what a short visit, Mr. Manning!’

‘I’ve done quite enough damage,’ said Tom rather ruefully; ‘besides, I expect Blanche is home by now.’ This was not quite true, but it expressed a hope. He shook hands, tried to get a long look into Ruth’s face, and went out. Whilst he hurried towards his home, a plan that had long been hovering, as it were, at the back of his brain, refusing to present itself with any clearness, became rapidly matured. A sense of great satisfaction stole over him, as he realized that this plan would serve the double purpose of helping his friend and of bringing about a complete reconciliation with Blanche. He had to confess that affairs of late in Sloane Street had been none too bright. Women were really curious creatures. Blanche loved him—of course she did—and yet she refused to show her love in what he considered was the only desirable way. Ruth loved Cedric, or, at any rate, would do so on the smallest provocation—such were his reflections—in spite of her apparent coldness, and yet up till now she

had not given the slightest encouragement to his proposals to bring herself and Cedric together. A blush, however, had been sufficient to convince honest Tom that all was not as it appeared on the surface. It seemed to him now that the time had come when his match-making powers were again to be brought into requisition. Blanche had not been affectionate, of course, because he had refused to write to Cedric before his last letter had been answered. But, then, who could have supposed, he asked himself, that Blanche, too, had been actuated by desires similar to his own? Why had she never said so until Cedric had left them like two fools? It was utterly impossible to succeed in any kind of business if women were to drag themselves into it.

He arrived at the house with much of his uneasiness dispelled. Mrs. Manning, he learnt, had not yet returned, but that was, if anything, satisfactory news. It would give him time properly to work out the plan of campaign. It was really pleasant to wait awhile, sure in the knowledge that when Blanche heard of his proposals she would fling herself into his arms, sobbing through very joy. He called up an alluring picture of himself as the forgiving husband. When one is sure of a pleasure to come, one likes to indulge to the full in the joys of anticipation. Tom smiled peaceably, the while he was taxing his brains to their utmost capacity. The supper hour was approaching. He grew positively nervous. Blanche had left the house in a temper, but every moment was bringing their reconciliation nearer. He was in his study. Once or twice he pulled aside the curtains and looked into the street. A hansom drove up to the house about eight o'clock, and the delighted Tom saw his wife alight. He sat down in

his chair and waited. The hall-door slammed. He heard her ascending the stairs. She passed his study. Oh, well, of course, she must wash before supper. He waited five minutes, and then ventured to go to her bedroom. A timid knock brought no reply. He tried the door. It was locked.

‘Blanche, dear,’ he began, and stopped to listen.

There was no answer.

‘I say, Blanche—supper! Unlock the door.’

‘I’m going to bed. I’ve got a headache.’

And in spite of much parleying through the keyhole Tom supped alone. This rebuff caused him to make a slight alteration in his plans. When he again demanded admittance to the bedroom the hour was late, and he was armed with a letter to Cedric, the composition of which had cost him an evening’s hard labour. Blanche, however, so far from reading it, refused to open her lips beyond uttering a remark upon the cruelties which husbands habitually practised on their unfortunate wives. And the letter lay on the dressing-table until Tom, worn out, no doubt, by his unwonted literary efforts, fell asleep. Then the wife of his bosom cautiously got out of bed, turned on the light, and read the following letter :

‘DEAR CEDRIC,

‘I have been meaning to write to you for some time—thanks for your last letter. But I have been so busy that I could not find time. City, you know. Well, it is Blanche’s birthday in a fortnight’s time, and we both want you to come here for a night or two to help us celebrate the event. No one else will be here. We played London Scottish last week, beating them 23 to 8, which was not bad, considering Thomas

crooked a month ago, and is still bad. I saw Lacey yesterday. Do you remember him? If you come, we might go down to Trinity and see Johnson. They have made him a Fellow. Jolly clever of him, I think. Also, I want your advice about something very important. I want to buy something, but can't make up my mind. Would you or not?

'Yours ever,

'TOM MANNING.'

Having read this interesting document, Blanche laid it on the dressing-table, turned out the lights, and woke her husband by the simple process of pulling his moustache. Then there followed a scene which gradually led up to such a reconciliation as Tom had desired. Blanche looked upon Cedric as a good angel. With him in the house her husband lost some of his annoying stupidity, or, at any rate, mislaid it.

That same evening at a late hour Mr. Sheridan walked into Ruth's room and sat down in one of her arm-chairs. This in itself was enough to cause her some misgivings. On the rare occasions when her father ventured to invade her sanctum he seldom proceeded far into the room.

'I am beginning to think,' he said, after the paternal kiss had been duly given and as duly returned, 'that Barnett is a preacher of some considerable merit. I have never, I think, heard such a rousing sermon from so young a man as that which he preached to-night. I have been supping with the vicar, and we were discussing it. Mrs. Fairbrother described it as a blast of the true horn. This afternoon, too, the Bishop, who, I regret to say, did not have the pleasure of hearing Barnett to-night, was talking about him in

a way which must have made the young man's ears tingle.'

Ruth said nothing.

'Of all your friends,' continued her father, 'I like him the most.'

'He is very nice,' Ruth admitted.

'Mother likes him,' he went on. 'I wonder why he was not here this afternoon.'

'Oh, church affairs, I should think.' She spoke listlessly as she gazed into the dying fire.

'Ah! yes. I wish you would follow his example. He could teach you how to work in the glorious cause of Christianity.'

'I suppose he could,' Ruth allowed.

'But you don't let him,' remonstrated Mr. Sheridan.

'How do I prevent him?'

Mr. Sheridan shrugged his shoulders. 'You like him, don't you, Ruth?'

It was really so ludicrous for her father of all people to be speaking in this way that Ruth laughed. 'I told you I did.'

He smiled diplomatically. The Bishop had warned him that Ruth was no longer a child, and he now believed him.

'Well?' said Ruth.

'Oh, well, I think he has a great future before him.'

'Yes, wedded to the Church.'

Mr. Sheridan started in his chair. 'What makes you say that?'

'He used the words to me yesterday.'

Mr. Sheridan gasped. Earlier in the week it had been made plain to him that Barnett was in love with his daughter, and owing to the advice showered upon him from more quarters than one he had had nothing

to say to such a statement, startling though it had been. 'He said that? Oh, of course, quite right. It is a figure of speech.'

'I don't think so,' said Ruth slowly.

'How do you mean?' He began to see for himself that he had been under-estimating Ruth's age and experience.

'He asked me to marry him, and I refused; so he said he would wed the Church, and I told him I thought that was the best thing for him to do.'

As a messenger of peace, as a would-be herald from the court of Hymen, the Crusader was obliged to admit himself to be a lamentable failure.

CHAPTER XVIII

RATHER THEATRICAL

LADY CARDELLAN gave Cedric a letter which had just arrived.

'And now, I suppose,' said she, 'you will run off and leave us again?'

Cedric smiled. 'I don't think so,' he replied. 'I'm hard at work now.' He looked at the letter. 'Oh, Tom Manning!' A shade passed over his face. 'I wonder what he wants.' He read the letter. 'Wants me to go up to London for Mrs. Manning's birthday.'

'And shall you go?'

Cedric shook his head. 'I've been going about so much lately, haven't I?'

'And to such odd places, dear—Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds.'

'Quite a commercial traveller,' laughed Cedric, putting the letter in his pocket. 'Well, that's all over. I was gathering materials for my new story. I'm doing the third chapter now.'

They went into the dining-room. The gong had sounded some little time ago, but Cedric had been working until the last moment, and was late.

'What is the next book to be about, or is that an indiscreet question?' Lady Cardellan inquired.

'It deals with the stage.'

'Ah! the London stage?'

'The stage generally,' said Cedric. 'The opening scenes are laid in Canterbury. I was there a few days ago, as you know.'

'I thought it was London, Cedie,' ventured his aunt.

'I only passed through.'

The meal proceeded.

Nephew and aunt discussed the local news of the day, but both were vaguely dissatisfied. Over and over again the Dowager was asking herself what kind of man was this new Cedric—whether he was degenerating, what was the true reason for his mysterious flights into different parts of the country, why he had lied to her on two separate occasions about the towns to which he had gone. It had been through mere chance—a mere slip on his part—that she had discovered his little falsehoods, slight in themselves, unnecessary, they seemed to her, yet infinitely distressing. She would have preferred to remain ignorant, yet she had discovered the truth in those two instances, and Cedric did not know that his words had betrayed him. If he had thought about her at all in connection with these peregrinations, it had been as the Kind Aunt Evelyn who was always ready to receive him at Chipton whenever he cared to come, but in no other way. He was his own master. At his father's death he had come into an estate which brought him in a far larger income than he could use. The ties to Chipton and its owner were, after all, but light. He had never quite realized how his aunt was treating him, how she wanted him to treat her. He did not understand that those days when he was away from Chipton were very dull ones for her. He had become even a greater part of her life than she suspected.

And Cedric was once more weaving labyrinths about himself. At Chipton he found it necessary to be constantly recalling the chief events of the past few weeks. He had entered into that woman's life, he had become necessary to her, and she—she, it seemed, had become almost necessary to him. He did not ask himself how it would end. There had been hours of what he termed happiness for both, and that was enough. While his manuscript lay before him he would recall that first interview with Lord Sothernmere at Olive's rooms in Borthampton. It had amused him. He had appreciated its dramatic qualities. None of Olive's fears had been realized, for the very simple reason that Cedric had persuaded her to let him play the part of ordinary acquaintance until the end of the tour. So far that had not been difficult. Cedric began to be rather pleased at his own cunning. It was so unlike himself to be cunning, he thought. Olive had spoken of leaving the stage when the tour was over. Sothernmere was to be told the truth then, if he still cared to hear it. Cedric was not the least jealous of the man—a poor simpleton, he thought him, to be flattered and amused, even at Olive's expense. He himself could twist Olive round his finger ; she was his entirely, and the knowledge was subtly gratifying. Yet at moments he almost shuddered. Memories of the Sheridans came to mind, and, against his will, comparisons would be made, his feelings towards Olive analysed, himself brought under the scourge of conscience. Then a letter would come, the new Cedric would envelop him, and Chipton, Ruth, all save this woman, would fade from the horizon. And, perhaps, as the train bore him to some provincial town where for the time Mr. Davenport's company was

quartered, he would ask himself whether he was immeshing Olive or she him.

Yet his life with the actress, the discovery of an existence such as he had thought could never have been his, brought with it the excitement which he found so alluring. This game with Sothernmere—for game he considered it to be—satisfied new-born cravings. All was fair in love and war—here were both.

‘From what you have told me at different times,’ said Lady Cardellan, ‘Mr. Manning must be a very nice man—what you would call, I think, a good sort?’

‘He is a good sort,’ agreed her nephew. ‘He is very dense, but amusing, and very honest. I don’t think he has a single enemy.’

‘Your poor uncle always used to say that one enemy at least was necessary to every man.’

‘Oh, then, we will give Tom one, but I couldn’t name him.’

‘And talking of enemies,’ continued Lady Cardellan, ‘I heard from Aunt Janet to-day. It seems there is further trouble about the Cumberland estate. One of the Gardner-Lathoms—Lord Sothernmere, I think—has had the matter taken into the courts again.’

‘Sothernmere?’ Cedric hid his surprise. Somehow it seemed strange to hear his name on his aunt’s lips.

‘Yes, I think so. I don’t know anything about him. I suppose he is head of the family now that the dukedom is extinct?’

‘Ah! I suppose so.’ Cedric spoke vaguely. ‘I know the man slightly.’

‘Aunt Janet seems to think a good deal of his lawyers.’

‘That is more than I should imagine the lawyers thought of him.’

‘Of course, this business has been going on for years now. Aunt Janet did not expect a revival just now. At the beginning of the year there was some trouble ; now it seems to be cropping up again.’

‘But Aunt Janet is not directly concerned, is she?’

‘Oh no ; but you know what she is. In a matter of this sort her cousin’s affairs are her own.’

‘The usual snobbery!’

‘I am afraid that most people would call it by that name.’

‘Sothernmere himself,’ continued Cedric, ‘is an outsider.’

‘Where did you come across him?’

‘I? Oh, somewhere or other—I forget the place. I have been meeting so many people lately.’

‘Quite strange for you, is it not?’

Cedric laughed rather loudly.

The next morning a letter from Olive informed him that the *Sarah-Jane* company had broken up a week earlier than had been expected, owing to a fire in one of the theatres on the outskirts of London. Cedric learnt that she had definitely refused the offer of another part from Mr. Davenport. ‘You must come to me at once,’ she wrote at the end of her letter. ‘I have formed a most delightful project, of which no one but yourself is to know anything.’

Cedric sent a vague reply to Tom, a telegram to Olive, and left Chipton that day.

Lady Cardellan said nothing on learning that the British Museum was his goal.

She waited patiently for his return. For a few days she heard nothing ; then a note came. He was being detained in London, would write his future arrangements as soon as they were made. A parcel of books

arrived by the following post, and the Dowager received it as a peace-offering. Mrs. Puddock asked questions which daily became more difficult to answer. Puddock's behaviour of late had been so unsatisfactory as to make her more caustic than ever before. She threw out dark hints, in the utterance of which frequent mention was made of bad women and that gruesome place of torture to come of which, it would seem, she had made a lifelong study. Mrs. Puddock knew her Bible well, but had succeeded in finding much therein which the most earnest and most imaginative scholars would have failed to discover or even deduce from the material before them. Dante's dream and Mrs. Puddock's differed in very many points, but they embraced a common idea. Once the gates of hell were opened, Mrs. Puddock was convinced that a series of truly diabolical punishments was to follow—punishments which the good woman had no hesitation in describing in the nicest detail. Lady Cardellan could do nothing but listen in silence. The weeks passed, but no letter followed the parcel of books. Cedric had given an address—a West-End hotel—but her letters were unanswered. She read the books, and began an attempt to reconcile herself to the fact that Cedric was no longer to share her home. If she had suspicions of the true cause of his absence, she did not allow herself to reflect upon them. Her nephew must be his own master.

So the days passed until one afternoon a fly drove up to the gates, and a huge man rang the bell as it had seldom been rung before. When the door had been opened, the stranger asked for Mr. Cedric Readham.

'He is away at present,' said the servant.

The man's face fell. He stood on the threshold in silence.

'Will you see her Ladyship, sir?'

The man shook his head. He had come to see Mr. Readham.

'Perhaps her Ladyship could tell you where Mr. Cedric is,' suggested the servant.

'Oh, in that case I should like to see her.'

Tom Manning was shown into the drawing-room.

'Mr. Manning, I must welcome you as an old friend of my nephew's. I am sorry to say he is in London at present.'

'I have just come from London.' Tom began to feel stupid. 'I came here especially to see him.'

'I am so sorry. But you will give me the pleasure of your company at dinner, Mr. Manning?'

'That's very kind of you, Lady Cardellan, but I must consider the trains.'

'There is a late one. Now, you must stay. I could not think of allowing you to go away again before dinner. What would Cedric think?'

Tom sat down murmuring polite thanks. 'I came here,' he said by way of explanation, 'because Mr. Lacey had heard that he had come back to Chipton.'

The Dowager was looking at her lap, on to which a small black animal had jumped. 'No, he has not come back.'

Powers of speech for a few moments forsook poor Tom. It was commonly said of the Dowager that to her of all people one could most easily offer one's full confidence. Tom glanced at her, understood perhaps the motherliness of the woman, but could say nothing. His visit to Chipton had followed on so many bewildering events. That curious discussion with Dr. Orley—

what had it meant? Why had Winnington Orley pounced upon his unfortunate self to deliver long speeches, the meaning of which he had hardly realized? Why had Blanche on a sudden become more enigmatic than ever—more affectionate, more coaxing, the Blanche of their courtship—in short, the Blanche whom he had always been wanting? And why had Lacey come out of his way to talk of the evils connected with the stage? What the deuce did it all mean? Moreover, why had Blanche at a moment's notice sent him down to Chipton to fetch Cedric to London? She had sent him—he admitted so much to himself. It would never have occurred to him to go in person to Chipton when a wire would have sufficed, but Blanche had been firm on the point. She wanted Cedric at Sloane Street, and Cedric had to be fetched. And now, in spite of his friend's own words to Lacey, Cedric was not in Chipton, but, according to Lady Cardellan, in London. Everything seemed to have been brushed over with a mysterious varnish, which was becoming more opaque every hour. Blanche, he had reflected in the train, could only be wanting Cedric in order to hand him over to Ruth; of that Tom had rapidly made himself sure. But, he had told himself a hundred times during the journey from London, surely she must know how hopeless any matrimonial undertakings in that direction had become. Then there were those words of Winnington Orley's. Poor Tom had solemnly shaken his head. One word only could have expressed his mental attitude. He was 'stumped.'

'Did you see Cedric in London?' asked Lady Cardellan—'lately, I mean.'

'No. I have not seen him since he left us last year,

but he saw Mr. Lacey, and told him he was coming down here on the following day.'

'And you have something of importance to tell him?'

Tom drummed the carpet with his right foot. Blanche would assign any amount of importance to his communication, which contained more than an invitation to Sloane Street; but honest Tom himself, resigned to the dismal fact that Cedric was not a marrying man, looked upon his visit in the light of so much valuable time thrown away. 'I wanted to take him back with me,' he said.

'I expect he is still gathering material for his new book.'

'Where is he gathering it?'

'Ah, that is more than I can say.'

Lady Cardellan laid herself out to obtain Tom's complete confidence, and so far succeeded as to learn all that her visitor knew about her errant nephew. And by the time when Tom, under the double influence of a bottle of the best claret of which Chipton Hall could boast, and the motherly talk of his hostess, had let her into the secret of his own matrimonial affairs, and incidentally of the effect which Cedric's presence in Sloane Street had produced, Lady Cardellan had come to a conclusion.

'I shall go to London,' she said quietly, 'and thresh the matter out. If Cedric is making a fool of himself, it is time to take some definite steps. If necessary, I shall write to my brother Loughton.'

'You'll come to town, Lady Cardellan?' A sense of satisfaction stole over him. His visit had led to something. 'And you will meet Blanche?' he continued. 'We shall be so pleased. I know she is worried . . . and there are the Sheridans . . .'

'About whom you have not told me very much.'

'It is so difficult,' said Tom.

'I take it, though, Mr. Manning, that it is entirely a question of Mr. Sheridan?'

'Oh yes,' said Tom, without thinking.

'I should like to make the acquaintance of the Sheridans. Cedric has done no more than mention their name to me. And this Miss Sheridan?'

'A splendid little wom . . . well, all you could wish for.' Tom was beginning to feel awkward again. 'I'm certain she's fond of Cedric. Well, you see, my wife thinks so, and I . . .'

'And Dr. Orley?'

Tom shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, I like him all right, but I'm not a brainy sort of man, you know, and I don't understand him very well.'

'I should like to meet him also,' continued the Dowager. 'Oh, we will sift this matter to the bottom.'

And that was precisely what Kind Aunt Evelyn proceeded to do without delay, and in the kindest possible manner. Tom returned to London, and poured out to his wife a slightly incoherent account of what had happened. Blanche said nothing until he had finished; then she hazarded the suggestion that a short time would no doubt see the whole nonsensical business finished and done with—a remark which Tom himself did not know whether to take as favourable or the reverse.

When the Smith-Davenport company dispersed, Olive Ranger considered that the time had come when a plan which had been slowly formulating in her brain during the past few weeks was to be carried into execution. People had remarked how very gentle she had

become ; even Miss Gormaston had thawed, and Miss Featherstone, perhaps in consideration of the social status of Olive's friend, had, to make use of her own expression, 'become very thick with Miss Ranger.' To the majority, however, this gentleness was regarded as a wily behaviour betokening some deeply-laid scheme. More than one bet, ranging from the humble sixpence of Mr. Pilling to the crown hazarded by Mr. Davenport's stage-manager, was made on the question of 'ookin' young Readham'—a man who was, perhaps with justice, regarded as 'green.' It was remarked, moreover, that his appearance corresponded with perfect regularity with the departure of Lord Sothernmere from the towns in which the company happened to be stationed—a fact which suggested that Readham, besides coming under the aspersion of greenness, was a muff. Cedric's one meeting with Sothernmere had not led to others ; it had done nothing more than introduce the two men to one another. Yet on the receipt of Olive's last telegram, containing as it did the welcome news that the tour had ended a little prematurely, Cedric determined to bring matters on to a slightly different footing. There would be a row, perhaps a more than usually vulgar row, but of the consequences Cedric had not the smallest doubt. And if Sothernmere was tiring of her—a supposition not at all improbable—a few words, he reflected, would succeed in bringing about all that was required.

He came to Olive's London flat, and learnt that she had bought out of her own savings a lonely little cottage, which stood in glorious isolation on the southern coast, a few miles from Dover. This was the news that was to be told to none other than Cedric.

'Oh, my dearest, this is all my own, my very own,' she whispered, as she nestled against him. 'I have bought it with my own money. It belongs to no one but myself, and I shall live there, and listen to the sea, and you will always be coming down to see me . . . you will come often . . . ? Life will be so different there, Cedric. You will come to me ?'

'Come ?' said Cedric ; 'I should think so. You dear girl ! fancy buying a cottage ! But why down there ?'

'It is all by itself, and I know the country-people and all the places round. I was born in Claniston, you know. It is a little village half a mile from my cottage.'

They talked of the cottage, and of the wonders of the sea, and Cedric began to understand that he was not tiring of her in the least. Nothing in her was offending him, as he at times suspected was the case. She was, indeed, showing new qualities, finer qualities than he had thought to find in her. All her loveliness belonged to him, and he conjured up visions of the lonely cottage by the sea, whither he would go for Olive and his work. The prospect was a doubly enchanting one.

'I shall bring my work down there, Olive,' he declared.

She smiled brightly. 'I had thought of that,' she told him. 'I shall fit up a room for you. It will be just heavenly. I have bought the place just as it was left by a funny old bachelor who lived like a hermit. It's quite tiny, but big enough for me, and you if you are good.'

Now, more than ever, thought Cedric, she looked the girl whom he had seen on board the Ostend packet. Thoughts of Ruth Sheridah did not intrude themselves. Olive away from the stage seemed to have none of the stage's ways. Yet, without a definite process of reason-

ing, he had come to the conclusion that there were to be no thoughts for the future, no idea of marriage. That was impossible ; besides, circumstances were showing him that he was not a marrying man, and ideas of the kind were apt to embitter him. True, he was not in love with her, according to his most honest ideas of love, but what of that ? She was in love with him. It was actually in his power to make a fellow-creature happy and himself satisfied at the same time ! That was enough. The near future would seem to have in store for him a time of peace ; if a storm should rise up later, it would be time enough to take precautionary measures then.

And while they talked he learnt much of Olive's former life by the sea. Her father had been a scholar, handsome, but of humble birth, a man who had never risen above the low station of village schoolmaster. Cedric suspected that drink more than the circumstances of his birth had kept him down. Olive admitted that he had died at an early age from drink. It had been in his family, which was her excuse for his inability to fight against it. 'It seems so funny,' she said, 'that some people can't fight where drink is concerned'; and Cedric, perhaps thoughtlessly, had replied that those particular men and women had started with the idea of upholding what had very nearly come to be a tradition of the family. He found himself waxing eloquent upon the subject. There were boys, he told her, who considered it a sign of manhood to ape the manners of those who had lived and suffered before them, and a poison played with was often a poison indeed.

She told him of the scenes she had witnessed in the south-coast village, and he wondered at her purchase

of a cottage so near to Claniston. She mentioned her dead mother with something like awe, and wished that Cedric had known her. And then, when she had allowed this retrospective and sentimental mood to dominate her for some time, she started up with a laugh.

‘Now we’ll talk about something else,’ said she. ‘If we go on like this we shall get miserable. Tell me all about yourself. Let’s arrange where to dine to-night. Oh, there’s lots to settle.’

‘Including Sothernmere?’

‘Bother Sothernmere!’ cried Olive, a frown passing over her forehead.

‘Yes; but what is to be done? I’m sick and tired of having him hanging round.’

‘He doesn’t know I’m back again, and then there is this law business, which is most lucky. I read all about it in the papers a day or two ago.’

‘Ah! the law business,’ repeated Cedric, thinking of Aunt Janet. ‘Yes, it is quite fortunate; but he is sure to find out about the fire. Lacey would tell him about the company. Where is Lacey?’

‘I don’t know. Having tea with his pet baron, I should think,’ laughed Olive. She had leant over him, and her arms were round his neck. ‘Isn’t it splendid being together again, Cedric? Oh, my darling, do you know what I love doing? I love writing “Cedric” all over sheets of paper—just “Cedric, Cedric, Cedric,” and then, “I love Cedric, I love Cedric.” Now then, kiss me, and tell me you love me.’

And Cedric said: ‘I love Olive, I love Olive,’ but, curiously enough, he was still thinking of Aunt Janet.

In the worst of tempers, and after a dinner which had consisted of more liquid than solid refreshment,

Lord Sothernmere arrived on the following evening at Olive's flat. He had passed through a trying day at the courts, had been, in his own words, 'badgered by every damned lawyer in the kingdom,' had learnt through Lacey that Davenport and his company had separated for the time being, and had, in consequence, permitted himself a generous supply of gin, which happened to be a very favourite beverage. The sight of Olive sitting alone on the sofa with a book on her lap in no way tended to ameliorate his condition of mind.

'Hullo!' was his greeting. 'Why the devil didn't you let me know you were back here? I suppose you've been back a month?' He threw down his coat and hat and stared at her without moving.

'I came back two days ago.'

'Well, why couldn't you have told me?' He spoke roughly.

'Told you! I've hardly had time to unpack my things. Really, how bad-tempered you are!' She had not done more than merely given him a momentary glance.

'Bad-tempered? I'm nothing of the sort. It's you who are bad-tempered. Damn it! You might get up from that confounded sofa when I come in. It isn't as if I'd just left you. Where are the drinks?'

She began to watch him narrowly.

'In the usual place, I suppose.'

He staggered rather than walked to a chest standing in a corner of the room. He poured himself out a tumblerful of gin-and-water, drank it off, and stared at Olive. 'Well, what on earth is the matter with you? Why don't you get up?'

'I'm just tired.'

'Just tired?' laughed Sothernmere. 'You've had nothing to make you tired. Tired! Tired of me, I suppose?'

'You are talking such nonsense.' She spoke with affected languor.

'Nonsense, am I?' Sothernmere refilled his glass. 'Oh, I say, let's stop this. What the devil's the use of quarrelling? 'Pon my soul, we dam well won't quarrel. I won't have it. You belong to me. Now give me a kiss, you little witch!'

'Not to-night. I'm too tired.'

He raced across to her. 'I want a kiss,' he shouted in a fury, 'and by God! I'll have one.' He took hold of her and kissed her. Olive did not offer the slightest resistance. She let him kiss her, but, a moment later, she pushed him from her.

'That's the last,' she said—'the last kiss.'

He stared at her stupidly.

'What in the name of thunder are you talking about? You seem to forget whom you're talking to.'

Olive shook her head wearily. 'I mean I don't want you here any more,' she said.

He laughed awkwardly. He was not too drunk to realize that she meant what she said. There was a change in her. He took another long drink, and began to put on his coat. Olive wonderingly looked on. She had expected him to fly into a most violent temper, instead of which he was only muttering to himself and preparing to go.

'Think I care?' he said, struggling with his coat. 'Think I care a damn? I'm just about sick of you and your fads. You can go and find someone else, if you haven't found him already, and I wish you luck. I've had enough of this sort of thing. I shan't go on

with women like you . . . game's not worth the — candle. I'm going to marry.' Again he laughed loudly, took up the half-emptied tumbler, and finished the drink. 'So this is the last you'll see of me! Think I care a snap?—a little twopenny-halfpenny actress!'

She found her voice. 'You seem in a very fit condition to think of marriage.'

'I suppose that's clever,' he retorted with a leer. 'Well, I've had enough of your wiles and your clevernesses.' He stalked to the door, but it was opened before he reached it.'

'Good-evening, Lord Sothernmere,' said Cedric, with a smile on his face.

Sothernmere stepped back involuntarily.

'What the devil are you doing here?'

Cedric shrugged his shoulders. 'It is hardly a remarkable occurrence to call on one's friends.'

'Damn you! What d'you want to come hanging about Olive for?'

'Apparently that is what you are doing, isn't it?'

'That is my business.'

'But I understood you to say that you had seen the last of Miss Ranger a moment ago.'

'I suppose you listened at the keyhole?'

'No; but you have a loud and not over-pleasant voice.'

Sothernmere looked from one to the other without speaking. The muscles of his face worked nervously. A minute before, the knowledge that for the future Olive Ranger would cease to be part of his life had worried him not in the least; but now, on the appearance of Readham, whatever his presence might mean, a kind of jealousy took hold of him. Perhaps he was a little sobered; perhaps his words to Olive had been uttered

without thought—the words that are spoken over-night and forgotten in the morning. He was not sure that he wanted the woman himself, but he did know that for the moment he did not want this other man to have her.

‘Look here,’ he said at last, ‘you’ve got to kick out.’

Olive went into her bedroom.

‘Don’t you think that is my business?’ Cedric was removing his coat.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘I’m sorry for that, Lord Sothernmere. Really, you are behaving in a most extraordinary fashion. A minute ago you were uttering a somewhat curiously-worded good-bye, and now . . .’

‘And now I’m damned certain that I’m not going to stand any nonsense from you or anyone else,’ shouted Sothernmere. ‘This flat belongs to me.’

‘I was given to understand that Miss Ranger signed her own cheques, and handed one of them at certain periods to her landlord.’

‘And who do you think pays money into her bank?’

‘Ah! I know so little about theatrical managers and their methods. I have never even run a circus.’

Sothernmere pulled himself up, and endeavoured to understand fully what was happening. This man was insulting him, yet he could see no way of getting the upper hand. ‘Let’s have an end to this tomfoolery,’ he said in as calm a tone as he could muster. ‘I understand your game well enough, and I tell you I won’t have it. One’s mistress is as much one’s property as one’s wife, and that’s the long and short of it.’

‘It occurs to me,’ retorted Cedric coolly, ‘that at the present moment you possess neither.’

Sothernmere wheeled round to the table and helped himself to another drink.

'Damn it!' he muttered. 'I don't care. Why should I? Little Ruth Sheridan's worth . . .'

'What's that?' Cedric had stiffened.

Sothernmere turned round with a sneer on his face.

'I resign my position,' he laughed. 'You are welcome.'

'You mentioned another name.' Cedric was quivering.

'Yes. Ruth Sheridan. Know her? The future Countess of Sothernmere. That's all. Now I'm off, and glad enough to shake off the dust of this beastly place—glad enough, I can tell you. I wish you luck, Mr. Readham.' He flung open the door and staggered out. He might, from the manner of his exit, have been acting upon the stage.

Cedric stood thinking.

'My darling, it's all over now.' Olive had put her arms round him. 'Now we are free to do what we like. Oh, how glad I am! He kissed me for the last time. I belong to you, Cedric. You will take me down to the little cottage? We shall be so happy. Cedric, dear . . . my dearest . . . you can't understand how much I . . .'

CHAPTER XIX

WHICH SHOWS VARIOUS DIPLOMATISTS AT WORK

IN the course of some half-dozen interviews with his friend Sothernmere, Arthur Lacey had succeeded in making that nobleman understand that the time had now come when a respectable marriage was very desirable and very necessary. He was further able to inform him that, by a singular piece of good fortune, he had been enabled to light on the very girl who would make the most suitable Countess of Sothernmere. It was no surprise to him to hear that Olive Ranger had preferred the Discobolean Readham—so he termed him—to the Earl of Sothernmere, nor was it any business of his if Readham chose to make a fool of himself with a girl who had spoilt her chances by leaving the stage at a moment when she could have had anything for the asking. If Olive chose to refuse the offers which she was receiving now she would find in the future that she had paid a heavy price for nothing but the gratification of an absurd whim, and that was all. The dramatist's interest, however, in Sothernmere had increased, more especially when it occurred to him that he might be doing a good turn all round by arranging a marriage between his friend and Ruth Sheridan. Sothernmere when he liked could make himself extremely agreeable, and Lacey, after he had carefully instructed his

friend in all the little idiosyncrasies of Mr. Sheridan's character, felt that he had every reason to look forward to a successful conclusion to his essay in diplomacy.

The Earl of Sothernmere became a frequent visitor at the Sheridans' house in Chelsea, and expressed himself as more than ordinarily interested in the various religious works to which Mr. Sheridan was devoting so much of his time and energy. The latter began to call up visions of his pet schemes in process of being put forward in the Upper House, and rejoiced accordingly. There was not too much of the snob in his nature, but it must be confessed that he looked upon the House of Lords as a body of far greater importance than the House of Representatives. Mrs. Sheridan, moreover, began to like this honest young man with such various interests as he apparently possessed, and was inclined to believe that the reports still rampant about his past career were, to say the least of it, gross slanders. 'He is just the man to be misunderstood,' she told a friend once, an opinion which, considering Mrs. Sheridan's general cleverness, must have been largely the result of Lacey's careful coaching. Sothernmere began to be extremely pleased with himself. His car was constantly at the Sheridans' disposal, and even Mr. Sheridan himself accompanied the noble owner on some of the latter's week-end runs into the villages of Surrey and Kent. Sothernmere speedily forgot the very existence of Olive Ranger and 'that ass Readham,' and prepared his campaign in a manner which would have done credit to the second Earl in the palmiest days of that nobleman's career.

Ruth herself looked on him with no little interest. He was so different from other men, so amazing, so

perfectly obvious, she thought ; and he had come at a time when a diversion was most welcome. Her mother began to notice that she was once again taking a healthy interest in things, and that, as the season advanced, she went out with commendable frequency. It would seem, she thought, that Cedric Readham was being forgotten. She did not know whether she was glad of this or sorry. There could be no comparison between the two men, and yet Lord Sothernmere came under her definition of a nice man. She arrived at the conclusion that there was nothing to be done but to wait and see how it all ended.

It was noticed, too, at this time, that Winnington Orley appeared eager to put off the cloak of solitude and enter into the gaiety of things. He came frequently to Tite Street. He showed himself at the theatres where the more serious plays were being produced, and wrote curious articles to the *Times* on the state of the British drama. He cultivated Lacey's acquaintance, and accepted more than one invitation to dine with Mrs. Manning. While there he met Lady Cardellan, and within a week that good lady had been invited to his own house, and had met some of the little fairies who so often brightened his study with their laughing faces. For the Sheridans, indeed, the season was a busy one, and even Mr. Sheridan failed to realize how seldom Mr. Barnett was putting in an appearance. But this may have followed on the frequency of the Bishop of Bayswater's visits.

It was a time of diplomacy, more especially when Lord Loughton joined his wife in London, and learnt from sundry sources of the dangers into which that odd nephew of his was thrusting his nose.

In the midst of a tissue of schemings Lacey was called

away to the North of England. There was to be an important revival of one of his earlier plays, and his presence on the field of action was indispensable. Sothernmere had sufficient confidence in his own powers to regard Lacey's absence from London as of the smallest importance so far as he was himself concerned; in reality, however, his stage of action had been shorn of its protagonist, and others were ready in the wings to sustain a heroine who did not realize that she was a heroine at all. For with Lacey away there began to be a kind of partnership between two such opposite diplomatists as the Bishop and Dr. Orley, both of whom had succeeded in different ways in obtaining much information about a certain disgraceful Cedric Readham. The Bishop proposed to bring this young man 'well within the pale.' That was his oft-repeated assertion. Dr. Orley had set himself the task of finding out this Mr. Readham, and of bringing him to Chelsea or its near neighbourhood. Mrs. Manning gave a dinner-party, to which the Sheridans were not invited, but of those who sat down at table only honest Tom himself failed to realize that a cabinet meeting was in process of being held. His guests liked Tom dearly, but, with a possible exception in the case of Lady Cardellan, they regarded him as a delightful athlete and nothing more.

The power of demanding unconsciously more than an expression of sympathy in a time of trouble or doubt from even those who may not be included in a list of one's greatest friends is only in the possession of a fortunate few, and rightly so, for the lucky possessors do not abuse their gift. At this time there were some half-dozen people who, from the most unselfish motives, were working for the happiness of two others, neither

of whom had the smallest help to give. And yet for both Cedric Readham and Ruth Sheridan these people were prepared to do very much more than they might have cared to essay in any other cause. Lady Cardellan herself had met Ruth, and immediately confessed to Winnington Orley, from whom nothing now was being hidden, that she could hope for no better niece.

'I am reminded,' said she, 'of an old poet. "There is a garden in her face."' "

'And we are the gardeners,' suggested Dr. Orley. 'Your nephew, Lady Cardellan,' he continued, 'is a difficult person. I recollect to have met him but once, I think, and yet . . .'

Lady Cardellan looked into his face as he paused. She had grown fond of this old man who had so suddenly come out of a shell. 'And yet what?' she queried.

'Perhaps I am inclined to agree with my god-daughter,' he said.

'But she has never said a word to you about him except to tell you that he was not very nice, and . . .'

'No more she has!' laughed Dr. Orley. 'But, then, you see . . .'

'Oh, I see perfectly. If I did not, I should not be here now, should I? Had you told me a month ago that I should come to London to find traces of a nephew who refused to discover himself, I should have laughed at the idea.'

'They tell me,' retorted the other, 'that I have no business to come out like this unless I am thinking of marrying myself.'

'Perhaps you will not be "out" as you call it, for long,' said Lady Cardellan. 'I can see myself back at Chipton in a little time, and you will go back to

your tea-parties with the little darlings, and give them their cakes and their tea.'

'We like to play with the glory children.' He was talking almost to himself.

'Sometimes we like to play with the grown-up children.'

'As we are doing now?'

They talked of the children who would always be making the world wonderful.

The days passed, and to Tom as well as to Ruth herself nothing out of the ordinary was happening. But Ruth had not forgotten her godfather's words, and as she recalled to mind those meetings with Cedric, she found excuses for his absence. Perhaps he had said nothing to her which had merited her thoughts about him; yet it seemed that he had cared for her. Words were not so important; there were other things to remember. It was not so difficult to hope, after all; and she listened to her father's eulogies on this youthful peer, who at one moment ran a circus, and at another played amateur parson with equal enthusiasm—so it seemed—with something like amusement. There is small doubt that Mr. Sheridan would not have been so ready to listen to the advice which was being tendered him from many quarters, had he realized the true import of much that was going on round him. As it was, when his child's godfather ventured upon ice which he had come to look on as decidedly thin, and started to discuss Ruth from many points hitherto untouched, he was very agreeably surprised to find that Mr. Sheridan was ready to consent to everything he suggested. Ruth, said her father, should be given the man of her choice. Nothing was more to his liking. Ruth should marry whom she pleased, when she pleased.

Winnington Orley thereupon lost no time in making Lady Cardellan acquainted with this statement. Such a state of affairs could only have arisen through the machinations of Arthur Lacey. Sothernmere had full confidence in his own powers, but he did not fail to recognise the fact that it was his friend who had paved the way for him, who had suggested the road which he was to take.

So the month of May went by. Lady Cardellan saw many of her old friends, and appeared to take delight in picking up all those threads which she had willingly dropped years ago. Aunt Janet, with a number of wonderful dresses from Paris wholly unsuited to one of her figure and age, took her husband about, and generally made herself as unbearable as possible. On account of her husband she appeared everywhere, and saw her name in most pages of the fashionable journals. 'Smart Lady Loughton,' said they, had come to town for the season.

And then in the first week of June a casual meeting in a west-end bar led to a multitude of happenings. It was a habit of Mr. Davenport's to regale himself in the late afternoon at a certain bar in Piccadilly. He was well known there, and invariably imbibed the same quantity of a particular drink, which bore a high-sounding name. Now it happened that after a visit to his bank Sothernmere found himself in the neighbourhood of this restaurant, at a time when he was possessed of a thirst which he would have described as unsaleable. The day, it must be owned, was extremely hot, and Sothernmere sauntered in, altogether forgetting until it was too late to recede that Mr. Davenport's presence at that time was almost a certainty.

Mr. Davenport greeted the peer with effusion. Of late the theatrical profession had had nothing to offer him but a series of disappointments. He had wanted Olive Ranger for a particular part, but Olive Ranger had refused it. He had wanted the benefit of Lacey's advice, but Lacey was in Manchester, too busy to write him more than a single line. He began to pour out his woes to Sothernmere, nor did he omit to mention Miss Ranger's name. There were fresh rumours current about that lady, and Mr. Davenport saw no reason why he should not do his best to discover how far these rumours might be correct.

'I haven't seen her lately ; so confoundedly tied down just now.' Sothernmere meant to imply that business of one kind or another was preventing him from seeing any of his former friends.

'I hear she's down at Dover somewhere about,' continued Mr. Davenport. 'Odd about 'er goin' off like that, when . . .'

'I believe she told me something about leaving the stage,' interrupted Sothernmere, lighting a cigar. 'Fine woman, you know, Davenport. I played the fool myself in that quarter.' He uttered this jestingly, but the remark was meant to be serious, and, in a measure, final. The time had come when for the Mr. Davenports were to be substituted the Mr. Sheridans.

'Ah !' said Mr. Davenport. 'I just wonder,' he went on after a little pause, 'ow long she'll care to stick to this love-in-a-cottage business. It don't pay, my lord, do it ?'

Sothernmere raised his eyebrows. Perhaps he felt more interested than he cared to show.

'They say it's that fellow Readham.'

And during the next ten minutes Mr. Davenport proceeded to give particulars of the Claniston establishment, as told to him by a friend who happened to be staying in the same place. Sothernmere listened and smoked, offered Mr. Davenport a cigar, which was accepted, finished his drink, said a hurried good-bye, and went. So the expected had happened. He was glad of it.

‘It gets me out of a difficulty,’ said he to himself ; and a feeling of satisfaction at his own integrity in giving up such a worthless creature as Olive Ranger caused a smile to cross his countenance. That night, however, he took occasion to write to Lacey, and told him what had happened.

His letter reached the dramatist at noon on the following day, and in the evening a note forwarded from his London address arrived from Manning. A smile came over his face as he read Sothernmere’s letter, but when he glanced at the few sentences in Tom’s childlike writing, he broke into a loud laugh. Here was an extraordinary coincidence—so extraordinary, indeed, as to merit early replies in both cases. The dramatist had no time to write to Davenport, because such a letter would have entailed the transaction of more business than was necessary, and business, moreover, which in no way concerned himself or his work—Davenport, he thought, presumed too much on their relations ; but a letter of three sheets to Sothernmere, and another to Tom Manning, which was almost as long—dealing as it did with Readham’s supposed whereabouts and the state of Lancashire football during the past winter, as culled from a paper—were in the nature of pastimes.

And so on the following day Tom heard that his

friend was staying in the village of Claniston, a charming place near Dover, Lacey wrote, which commanded a view of the Channel such as was unequalled in any other English hamlet. There was a postscript which contained the word 'actress,' but Tom could make nothing of it. Mrs. Manning, on reading the letter, told him not to worry. It was obvious, she said, that Mr. Readham was working by the sea in a perfectly ordinary and natural manner. She urged that he should not be disturbed. Tom would therefore have expressed considerable surprise had he heard his wife two hours later tell Lady Cardellan that Mr. Readham was spending a rather mysterious existence at Claniston. The Dowager handed on the news, such as she had it, to her brother, who lost no time in seeing a valise packed, and starting for the south coast.

The Dowager had made use of a powerful argument. The honour of the Readham family, she said, was at stake. That was enough, and within the space of three seconds the diplomatist had made his decision.

Aunt Janet was left in the dark, but her sister-in-law undertook to see that Lord Loughton performed his latest feat in diplomacy without being subjected to the usual heckling from his wife ; and with a little trouble she succeeded in making her ladyship understand that her worthy husband had proceeded to Dover on a matter which concerned no one but herself. Aunt Janet was inquisitive by nature, but she knew her sister-in-law, and resigned herself to the inevitable. No questions were asked at the time ; a multitude came later.

'And that nephew of mine ?' said Aunt Janet a day or two afterwards.

'Working,' replied the Dowager. 'He is a great worker. I expect him in London shortly.'

'I think he's an idiot,' said Aunt Janet; 'I always did.'

Lord Loughton proceeded on his latest mission with mixed feelings of anger and elation. If it were true that his nephew was disgracing himself and his family by carrying on a low intrigue with a vulgar actress—to his lordship the stage spelt vulgarity—then the affair must be stopped at once, no matter what the cost might be. The head of the Readhams was determined to stand no nonsense. There had already been enough trouble of this kind in his family. His blood boiled at the notion of further scandals. On the other hand, he was pleased that his sister, whom he regarded as a female sage, inasmuch as she was the only woman who could in the least manage his wife, had entrusted him with the delicate mission of bringing this scapegrace nephew back to his family. It would be the first task at which he would be able to work alone for many years. He arrived at the *Lord Warden* with plans for the campaign fully matured. From the manager of the hotel he learnt that Claniston boasted of a hotel, and straightway indicted a letter engaging rooms for the following day. That young nephew of his should learn that his uncle was a man who would stand no humbug. He retired to rest comfortably elated in mind. There were some who called Lord Loughton an old woman; with this fact Aunt Janet had often taunted him. The time had now come when such aspersions could be proved to be as groundless as they were ill-natured.

'I shall stand no nonsense,' he whispered for the sixth time, as he got into bed. Somehow the absence

of his wife succeeded in making him less anxious than usual to depend upon the opinions and ideas of others.

He drove out to Claniston on the next morning, and immediately instituted veiled inquiries. In answer to carefully-worded questions, he learnt that Claniston was 'a great place for the "profession," many celebrities of the stage making it their retreat during periods of "rest."' Miss Tim Charley, the Gaiety favourite, invariably spent the summer in a little cottage away over to the west. His lordship agreed with his informant, the manageress, that a nicer situation could not be found in England. Sir George Garnet, the famous tragedian, likewise owned a cottage near to the church, where he occasionally read the lessons. Lord Loughton was pleased to tell the good lady an anecdote about Sir George, whom he knew personally. The anecdote was devoid of all interest, but it is told in Claniston to this day.

And then, while he was standing at the door of the hotel, looking out on to the surrounding hills, a gate behind him opened, and there appeared his nephew himself.

'Good-morning,' said the manageress affably.

Cedric was staring at his uncle. The head of the Readhams had fixed a glass to his eye, and had drawn himself up to his full height. He began to twirl his moustache with affected fierceness. He had hardly bargained for so early a meeting.

'Good-morning, uncle.'

'Good-morning to you, sir.'

'I thought you were abroad.'

'You were mistaken.'

Endeavouring to hide his surprise, Cedric asked after the health of Aunt Janet.

‘Your Aunt Janet enjoys the best of health.’

The manageress, somewhat surprised, retired into the privacy of the bar-parlour, and there proceeded to discuss matters with her assistant. In the meantime Lord Loughton had taken his nephew into his private sitting-room.

‘And now, sir,’ said the diplomatist in a very bellicose manner, ‘perhaps you will be so good as to explain the meaning of this.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of your presence in this secluded part of the world.’

‘Oh, I’m working at a book.’

‘Alone?’

‘Certainly. I do not believe in collaboration.’

Lord Loughton sat down in an arm-chair.

‘Now, my dear fellow,’ said he, ‘let us have no beating about the bush. You are down here with some woman or other, and the thing has gone far enough. People are talking about it in London, and . . . er . . . in fact . . . er . . . well, I have come down here for the express purpose of seeing you out of it. We can’t afford to be talked about. Who is this woman, this actress? . . . Well, I don’t altogether want to know. All I want you to do is to come back to your Aunt Evelyn in London.’

‘Aunt Evelyn in London?’ exclaimed Cedric.

‘It was she who asked me to come down here,’ replied his uncle, with a nod.

It was on the tip of Cedric’s tongue to say that his mode of living was his own affair, and no one else’s, but Lord Loughton had appeared at a critical moment. He had come into Claniston that morning in order to think out some problems that were worrying him. It was becoming plain that the present state of affairs

could not go on for ever. Little traits in Olive's character were coming to light—traits which, as he told himself, jarred. She was not proving herself altogether the woman he had imagined her to be. She was affectionate ; she loved him, he supposed ; she was unselfish where he was concerned, but she was second-rate. There was no other word for it. She seemed to be the woman always, the girl never. And he was becoming surfeited. He had suspected as much on the previous day ; now he was certain of it. And his Kind Aunt Evelyn had sent Uncle Loughton to fetch him home ! Cedric could have laughed. He was being treated like a child. The situation savoured somewhat of a comic opera.

He did not speak for a moment or so.

'So,' continued his uncle, a little more affable now that Cedric showed no signs of developing those symptoms of unreasonable rage which, as he had read, young men in Cedric's position were wont to affect—'so, my dear fellow, I shall be glad to hear that you will fall in with my plans and come back to London at the earliest possible hour.'

Cedric sat down.

'Suppose for a moment,' he began, looking at the carpet, 'that this woman and I had determined to spend the rest of our lives together, and away from everyone else !'

Lord Loughton uttered the word 'Stuff !' in a manner which implied at once contempt and incredulity.

'And yet, if I left her now, it would be a case of rather caddish desertion '

'Nonsense !' retorted his uncle in his loudest voice. 'You are not going to tell me that these sort of people . . .'

'These sort of people, as you call them,' interrupted Cedric with warmth, 'are human beings with hearts and brains . . .'

'And empty purses,' finished the diplomatist. 'It is merely a question of money. You may take my word for it. A week will not have passed before the lady, whoever she is, is solacing her wounded feelings in other directions, possibly in directions not extremely complimentary to yourself.' He uttered a little laugh.

For a moment Cedric was tempted to make an angry retort, but he thought of Aunt Evelyn, of Ruth Sheridan, of his mother. It was as though visions of all three were passing in front of his eyes. He remembered only that Olive was boring him, sickening him, and his mind was made up.

'All right,' he said ; 'I don't mind owning that I've had about enough. A cheque will, as you say, work wonders.' But even as he spoke, he knew that he was playing coward ; he knew that he did not believe his own words. Olive was not like the others.

Lord Loughton beamed. The glass fell from his eye, and he extended his hand. 'I thought we should have no difficulty,' he said. 'Most of us, you know, go in for this sort of thing in our youth, sometimes more than once. Now, let me give you a word of advice. Tell the woman that you've seen me and are wanted in London. Say you will write to-night. Be vague. And then, when you do write, send a cheque, and make it double what you propose to send. It's safer, my boy—much safer.' He proceeded to deliver a carefully-prepared sermon, with the text of 'family honour.' Cedric listened. Once again it seemed as though he was taking part in a drama centring round a Cedric

who was no part of himself. But he left his uncle to walk back to the cottage with the knowledge that a load had been lifted.

Olive was reading when he returned.

She had changed considerably since Cedric had shared her little home. Before, she had not been sure of him, and she had been perhaps a little more careful than was absolutely natural ; now there were no doubts, no worries, and she allowed herself to drift in the sea of happiness, unheeding storms, forgetful of breakers.

Cedric lost no time.

'I met my uncle,' he said, 'quite by chance. He wants me to take him back to London for some function or other. . . .'

'You won't go, dear ?' There was a note of alarm in her words.

'Well, I thought I'd better take the old chap. He is rather touchy, and I don't want to offend him.'

She threw the book down. 'I don't want you to go,' she said, almost frightened. 'Cedric, you mustn't go.'

Cedric appeared thoroughly at his ease. He was a tolerable actor at times. 'My dear girl, don't be foolish. I haven't been out of the place for weeks, have I ? and now when I suggest running up to London for a day or two, you . . .'

'But you will come back in a day or two ?' She had put her hands on his shoulders.

He kissed her.

'Don't you worry yourself. You must see that I can't afford to offend the old boy. I promised to go by the four-o'clock train. You can help me to get my things ready. I've nothing in town. Or, better still, you go and get the lunch ready, and I'll see to the packing.'

He began to understand that all his few belongings must be packed.

Later in the day he found himself standing on a crowded London platform. During the journey he had hardly spoken a word, but London with its dirt and dust seemed strangely welcome. He felt that he could forget Claniston without difficulty, and he had already composed in his mind the letter to Olive. He solaced himself, moreover, by muttering a sentence he had once seen as a title to a magazine story—'To every man a damsel or two.'

Lady Cardellain greeted him warmly.

'By now,' she said, 'I should imagine the novel was complete.'

Cedric observed that he had still to put the finishing touches to it.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH LORD SOTHERNMERE IS NOT ON HIS BEST BEHAVIOUR

DURING the three following weeks the Mannings thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Never before had there been such complete harmony between husband and wife. Tom took to purchasing costly presents for Blanche merely for the sake of spending money upon her ; Blanche, as in those wonderful days of courtship, again began to fill his pipe, and put a match in close proximity to his nose for the purpose of lighting his cigars. The day of petty quarrels was over. The sun shone persistently—a rare thing for it to do in London—and Tom said that he admired it, and Blanche agreed with him, and they sat and watched it together, as a shepherd and his love might have watched it from a country lane. The house in Sloane Street had become metamorphosed into some fairy palace.

And one or two people, including Lady Cardellan, began to notice that two individuals, a man and a girl, were very frequently to be seen within the portals of this fairy palace. Winnington Orley, for one, was so satisfied with affairs in general that he extended to Henry Armitage an invitation to a luncheon-party in his own house, and the Professor accepted it. To this party two members of the Sheridan family came.

Lady Cardellan and her nephew were there, and the Mannings, and the host became so extremely jovial, and, as the Professor remarked later, so inordinately juvenile, as to suggest to his professorial mind that something in the nature of a phenomenon would shortly be taking place.

It has been remarked by an Irish writer of the eighteenth century that 'pride is the most uneasy thing in the world, and the most odious.' That pride is odious might at times be open to question ; that it is uneasy is almost in the nature of an axiom. How often is it a sort of Universal Deceiver, a very merchant of some layman's quackery ! How seldom does it run in harness with sincerity ! How often is it misunderstood ! What a burden it may become, and what a dangerous burden ! Yet there are times when it comes as an ally, weak, vacillating, but in a sense warmly welcomed. And this same Irish writer, in treating of the subject, goes on to say that pride, like love, cannot exist lest two be concerned. It was certainly the case that until Cedric had come into, and gone out of, Ruth's life, the latter had not so much as given a thought to the subject. Yet when he had gone, she had hastily summoned to her aid this ally, and found in it a workable mercenary. At a cost she had leaned upon it for support. But when without warning she had met Cedric again in the Mannings' drawing-room ten minutes before the luncheon-hour, this mercenary had received an abrupt dismissal from her service. An ally was no longer wanted. Even as she shook hands with this man, who, as the ally had told her, was nothing but an actor, a philanderer, she recalled that conversation with her godfather, and wondered whether his re-entrance into the world's

affairs had brought Cedric back to her. For she loved Cedric—had loved him since that time when she had half-seriously condemned him for his books. She shook hands with him, and nothing but a slight blush showed that their meeting was anything but an everyday occurrence ; yet her heart was beating fast, and there was no thought of anger in her breast, only one of a great thankfulness.

Pride, too, amongst other things, had taken Cedric to the cottage at Claniston, and pride might have prevented him from seeing Ruth again, had not a host of friends persisted in treating him as a small child, and trusting to Miss Sheridan to do the rest. The luncheon-party in Sloane Street was a success. It was, moreover, for Cedric and Ruth, the first of a series of meetings, which the world, always ready with an unkind word, might have defined as clandestine.

To Cedric the London season meant something which he could never have imagined would be his. With Aunt Evelyn helping him, with the Mannings as host and hostess—above all, with Ruth constantly with him, the days passed like wonderful dreams. A simplicity had come over things, he thought. There was no use, no inclination now for the old self-analysis. This was the interpretation of the life that until now had been a mystery to him. It was for this love, this glorious gift of love for a woman who could return his love, that he with the others had been created. Love had supplied an answer to that riddle which had been defying solution since Cambridge days. Memories of Claniston, moreover, of Olive Ranger, had all but disappeared at the time of his sending her the letter with its enclosed cheque. He had followed his uncle's advice. Whether the woman would make use of it or not did not

trouble him. He had no time to think of her. He had only done what hundreds of other men had done—were doing every day. But one afternoon, when the Mannings' drawing-room happened to be empty save for the presence of Ruth and himself—no very rare occurrence—he began to tell her what had happened after he had left London.

She put her hand playfully across his mouth.

'Haven't we said we love one another, Cedric?'

Cedric nodded.

'Well, then, I don't want to hear anything. You probably hated me at the time, because my father was stupid, and did all sorts of things which sometimes worry you now. I'm not a sort of stage girl to be jealous of your past. You need not think that you are the only man who has kissed me.'

For a moment or two Cedric persisted.

'It would take a weight off my mind, dear,' he said.

'It's about another . . .'

'About another woman; of course it is,' laughed Ruth. 'You don't think I expect no other woman to fall in love with you, do you? Why, I can't understand how the others stop themselves! Now promise me you won't talk about this other woman to whom you have been making love, and . . .'

'And what?'

'Oh, we'll always love one another.'

For some little time they did not speak. Then Cedric left her side to walk over to the mantelpiece.

'And what about your father?'

Ruth shook her head. 'Not yet,' she said. 'He is not to be told yet. We have settled with mother, and that must be enough. Mother always liked you, you know—almost as much, I believe, as I did myself

at first. She is rather bewildered at present, but she can't do more than she does for us.'

'But why wait any longer?'

'Because, darling, another man is going to propose to me in a day or two.'

'The devil!' cried Cedric. 'What consummate cheek! Jack Barnett?'

'Oh, he proposed to me long ago. He's gone entirely to the Church. No, this is someone else, and I'm not going to tell you anything about him. I rather want to see how he will propose. He is so amusing.'

'Ruth, it is not a laughing matter.' Sothernmere's name, forgotten until then, came to mind.

'Oh yes, it is, dear. You see, you don't know who the man is.'

'Well, you must tell me. Perhaps I do know.'

'No, I shan't tell you anything until he has actually proposed. He is coming to dinner to-night, so he may do it then.'

'I could easily find out who he is.'

'I dare say, but I don't want you to do anything of the sort. Until this man proposes—oh, he must propose soon, I shall egg him on—I can't tell father anything. There is a reason. You must just wait.'

'All right,' said Cedric, and he resumed his seat. After all, she was his, and nothing else could matter.

'Do you know, Ruth,' he said a little later, 'I believe Dr. Orley has been doing a lot for us. I don't know how much, because he is such a curious man, but I think he wants us to marry.'

'Wants us to marry?' laughed Ruth happily. 'Of course he does. Next to you, I think he is the dearest man in the world.'

A conversation of a private nature was continued until a servant appeared with tea. When Blanche returned from a shopping expedition, she found her guests discussing the philosophy and writings of Dr. Johnson with much interest.

That evening Mr. Sheridan was more than usually gracious towards his noble guest. Earlier in the day, happily unconscious of his beloved daughter's whereabouts, he had had much pleasure in informing a fellow-churchwarden that such sinister rumours as there might be to the discredit of his new friend were probably without the slightest foundation. He had further stated as his firm opinion that although Lord Sothernmere might have been unfortunate in some of his earlier acquaintances—Mr. Sheridan did not know of the circus which his lordship had formerly run at a considerable expense—there could be no mistaking the good work he was now doing, both with regard to the *Chelsea Mission for Lost Souls* and to the *East End Lads' Christian Association*, of which useful body he had himself the honour to be permanent vice-president. Moreover, his lordship was the anonymous author of a very welcome tract concerning the iniquities so prevalent amongst the Upper Classes, and Mr. Sheridan recommended to his friend *The Vices of Vanity Fair* as a noble pamphlet. The Bishop of Bayswater had been delighted with it, said Mr. Sheridan, and he looked for great things from the young peer. Mr. Sheridan did not know that the Bishop of Bayswater looked upon the noble lord as no better than he should be, but he had been brought to imagine that the mischievous Miss Ruth had fallen a victim to the young man's charms, and gave advice and opinions accord-

ingly. At dinner the subject of the tract, one of Lacey's most superb efforts, was brought up for discussion. Ruth kept her countenance with difficulty. She had read the tract in her own room, and had roared with laughter as she detected each new sentence of the true author's handiwork. Much that was therein of the most beneficent appearance to Mr. Sheridan was very differently understood by his daughter. The little simple sentences carried in their wake such subtleties as only Lacey could have devised. It had been with difficulty that she had refrained from showing it to Cedric, but she was determined to finish 'the Sothernmere farce' before venturing upon a campaign which, even though she was sure of ultimate victory, would of necessity mean a tremendous civil war. Cedric, she told herself, was not to be worried with any of Sothernmere's doings until affairs had proceeded a little further.

'The Bishop of Bayswater,' said Mr. Sheridan at the table, 'was charmed with it.'

Sothernmere murmured his delight at this unexpected praise. He had come to dinner this evening with the firm intention of speaking to Ruth, of whom he was really fond, on the important subject of matrimony. A letter from Lacey in the morning had determined him. 'You, and incidentally I, have now done enough,' wrote the dramatist. 'A little affair seems likely to keep me north for some weeks. You may, however, rely on a groomsman in myself. I am glad to hear of the new *Vanity Fair's* success.'

'I was speaking to Miss Amphill about it,' Mr. Sheridan was continuing his eulogy of the pamphlet. 'She was so pleased. She is, as you know, on the new Royal Commission on Education—such an admirable lady.'

'The ugliest woman I know,' was Ruth's definition.

'Beauty is not everything, is it ?' said the noble hypocrite.

'Not in the case of education, I suppose,' allowed Ruth.

'My dear Ruth,' remarked her father severely, 'you might well wish many worse things than the possession of Miss Amphyll's qualities.'

'She must be a hard worker,' said Sothernmere, to whom the lady in question was quite unknown, save as a friend of his host's.

Mrs. Sheridan observed that Miss Amphyll's chief fault lay in the rigidity of her doctrines. 'She is too machine-like. She reminds me so of Darwin's theory. I connect her with nations rather than with individuals.'

'And a very proper connection,' retorted her husband. 'One must think of the majority. I place every confidence in Miss Amphyll.'

Ruth, admitting the finality of this remark, adroitly turned the conversation. When the ladies had retired to the drawing-room, Sothernmere lost no time in asking Mr. Sheridan's leave to propose for his daughter's hand. He was in the best of tempers, and an excellent brand of champagne had done much to give his tongue an agreeable, though not as yet excessive, freedom. He spoke of his unfortunate past, by Lacey's advice ; he informed his host of the extent of his income, also by Lacey's advice ; he expatiated at some length on his deep affection for Ruth. And he had the satisfaction of hearing from his would-be father-in-law that nothing would give that gentleman greater pleasure than to see his daughter so happily settled. Whereupon it was arranged that his lordship should be given

an opportunity of inspecting Miss Ruth's room without delay, and for this purpose Mr. Sheridan himself called to his daughter. Ruth appeared on the stairs.

'Will you show our friend your room, Ruth?'

Ruth appeared delighted with the idea, and from her smiling countenance both father and suitor augured happy results.

'By Jove!' said Sothernmere, looking round at the various trophies which Ruth had stuck in prominent positions, 'I wish you had invited me in here before, Miss Sheridan.'

'Do you?' Ruth made him sit down in the most comfortable armchair.

'Yes, it's a ripping little place.'

Ruth proceeded to put on the mask of professional guide. She gave her guest short histories of each and all of the athletic insignia with which her walls were adorned. She intimated that in the past most of her friends, oddly enough, had been distinguished in one or another branch of sport. She mentioned the case of the Reverend John Barnett, incidentally remarking that football was extremely good for developing the muscles of the leg, and she recounted numerous anecdotes of the hunting-field apropos of no one in particular. Sothernmere, with a cigarette between his lips, listened with a growing idea that his purpose was being made difficult. But as she spoke his admiration increased. What a countess she would make! If his lordship had chanced to read the history of Miss Ethel Newcome, doubtless he would have compared himself with the Marquis of Farintosh. As it was, he took advantage of a momentary lull in the girl's chatter to take up a standing position in front of the fireplace, and, after a few preliminary remarks, un-

burdened himself. He dilated upon the rottenness of his past career, and though he scorned the idea of donning the proverbial sackcloth and ashes, he owned to a sincere desire to live differently for the future. There would be, he said, an opening for him in the political or the diplomatic world—there was, indeed, such an opening already—and he was only hesitating now in order to express first to Miss Sheridan his admiration and affection for her. That he had little to offer her he was ready to admit—too ready, perhaps, for Ruth found it difficult at moments to preserve that dignified demeanour which she considered the occasion demanded—but he hoped that she understood to what a great extent she had entered into his life. He leant forward to seize her hand.

‘Your father,’ he continued, ‘has given me leave to ask you to be my wife.’

‘My father does not know that I am already engaged to be married.’ Ruth spoke quietly, but her heart was beating fast. It was the first time that she had felt herself justified in speaking such words. Perhaps she considered that under the circumstances they were due to Sothernmere. But she had never supposed that the mere utterance could have made her so happy, so proud, so ready to sympathize with this man for whom she had not the smallest respect. ‘It has been a secret until now,’ she went on, and . . .’

She was interrupted.

‘What do you mean? You are engaged to another man?’ For a moment he stared without speaking. Then the remembrance of what had been sacrificed for this girl came to him, and the true meaning of his proposed marriage with her. He burst into a torrent of

words. Why had she never told him of this before ? Why had she allowed him to suppose that he was favoured with her esteem and regard ? He tried to be sarcastic, tried to hide a growing temper, but he could not disguise his resentment. Ruth was genuinely sorry, more especially when she saw that he was trying to take his defeat nobly. He was, she thought, more fond of her than she had supposed. It would be useless to deny that in almost all cases we are subtly flattered by a pronouncement of affection ; at such a moment we are the more inclined to make some return, inadequate though that return may be. A few minutes before this outburst on Sothernmere's part Ruth had not the slightest intention of telling him more than that she was already engaged, and that she must therefore decline to look upon him other than as a friend. Now, on a sudden, she determined to tell him of that trouble in the past which was only now being slowly removed. For a few seconds she resisted the temptation to utter Cedric's name, and Sothernmere listened eagerly. Then the name would no longer be kept back. She was shocked at the result.

Sothernmere had become haggard ; he could hardly speak. In a moment the work of months on Lacey's part had gone for nothing, and the life in the past was telling. Ruth to him was no longer different from the other women who at one time or another had come into his life. Gone was all idea of his true surroundings—he was once again his old self, ill-bred, brutal, animal-like. He threw his cigarette into the fire, and instinctively looked round for a tantalus.

‘ What is it ? ’ asked Ruth involuntarily.

‘ You blame your father, do you ? ’ he cried. ‘ Well, it's more than I do. Perhaps you don't understand

who this man whom your father kicked out of his house really is? For your own sake, I think I'd better tell you.'

Ruth rose. 'I think we had better go back to the drawing-room, Lord Sothernmere,' she said, willing to forgive rash words, but unwilling to listen further.

'Hold on a minute,' continued Sothernmere roughly. 'I've something to say before you go. I know this man Readham. I think you are making a mistake. There was an actress—Olive Ranger. I thought I liked her, but threw her over when I found out what she was. You had better be careful of her. Actresses are sometimes dangerous, and Readham took my place. You understand what I mean?'

He was astounded to see Ruth laughing merrily.

'Oh, I know all about her,' she said, speaking as though Cedric's acquaintance with this actress was in the nature of a joke. 'But don't let that worry you. Indeed, why should it? Of course, you spoke for my good, but there is nothing to trouble about.'

There was an ugly sneer on Sothernmere's face.

'Some of these actresses are not so easily set aside. You will find, I'm afraid, that . . .'

But Ruth would not listen. The war had begun, and the campaign had opened with a victory. Of this Olive Ranger her own Cedric had been trying to tell her. That sufficed. Perhaps she was sorry for this woman; perhaps this woman loved as she herself loved. She drew herself up as Sothernmere passed out of the room. This was a case when self came first.

Her family did not see her again that evening. She would have seen no one but Cedric then—Cedric, or perhaps Winnington Orley. For the first time for many weeks those few moments at the bedside in

which the girl had always endeavoured to bring herself into a condition of absolute sincerity were given to the utterance of a very definite prayer. Once under the clothes, her mind resumed its normal buoyancy, and a mouse or a burglar, had either been present, would have heard a series of muffled sounds proceeding from the bed. Sothernmere's behaviour that evening, and a probably similar outburst to be expected from her father on the morrow, were sufficient to excite in her feelings of no slight merriment.

Sothernmere himself went straight to Manchester.

CHAPTER XXI

A PILGRIMAGE OF JOY

PROBABLY the best piece of prose of which Mark Denman was author was a description of the old-world town of Bruges. Cedric had spent many hours wandering amongst its quaint streets, watching the old lacemakers as they sat at work on the doorsteps, listening to Europe's most beautiful belfry. Even Denmanism in its most cynical aspect could hardly do aught but express admiration. The somewhat melancholy history of the town had perhaps struck a note of sympathy, and he liked to conjure up visions of former splendours as he walked the all but deserted streets. He could picture boats laden with merchandise on the weed-covered canals ; he could see the market-place as rendezvous of all the great merchants of the western world ; he liked to fancy that such masters as the Van Eycks, Hans Memling, and Gerard David were even now at work upon one of their marvellous paintings. He had travelled through Belgium many times ; he had stayed in many a quiet village, many a little town, where no word of French was heard, but of all he liked Bruges the best. And it was to Bruges that, late in the year, he took his bride.

The civil war in Tite Street had ended with that same

abruptness which had marked its beginning. A short interview had taken place in the Sheridans' dining-room on the morning after Sothernmere's hurried departure. The master of the house was in the worst possible temper ; Mrs. Sheridan was eager to keep the peace, but inclined to be hysterical ; Ruth was frankly frivolous—' wickedly shameless,' according to her outraged father. She had led him to suppose that she entertained some such feelings for the unfortunate young peer as had filled his own breast, and her behaviour threatened to be in the nature of a scandal—a scandal to the Church as well as to her family. Much that had been brought into one or more of the many tracts which bore Mr. Sheridan's name was now applied to the present occasion, and Ruth listened to a series of rather melodramatic epithets. She waited patiently for some time, and then observed that her affections were not bestowed upon Lord Sothernmere, but upon someone else. Mr. Sheridan's cigar had dropped to the ground, and been dutifully picked up by his daughter.

' What is this, Ruth ?' he demanded.

Ruth had intended to mention Cedric's name then and there, but at the last moment refrained from an act which would probably do no more than add to her father's obvious disappointment. After the manner of past times, when daughters of houses were not allowed much choice in the matter of matrimony, she had begged her father to ask nothing further for twenty-four hours, and, without waiting for a reply, had retired to her own room.

Mrs. Sheridan was relieved on finding that her husband shortly afterwards had left the house. He did not return until the household was wrapped in

peaceful slumber. Had a detective been placed in Tite Street with the sole object of watching No. 138, he would have noticed nothing out of the ordinary, save, perhaps, a somewhat large number of telegraph-boys, who apparently did little else but perform the journey between the post-office and Mr. Sheridan's house. Ruth and her mother were losing no time, and on the following day, whilst Mr. Sheridan was still occupied with his morning paper, an early visitor arrived in the shape of Dr. Winnington Orley. He was followed, oddly enough, by the Bishop of Bayswater, the latter having received a mysteriously-worded wire from Ruth on the previous evening. The Mannings arrived shortly before noon, and proceeded to make themselves at home. Blanche went to Ruth's room, and there engaged in a very private conversation. Honest Tom, at once bewildered and delighted at the turn things were taking with such surprising suddenness, sat in the dining-room, and listened to the voices of three elderly gentlemen. He recalled a former occasion when he had sat in the same room, and smiled as he thought how the tables were now being turned ; for the master of the house resembled nothing so much as an accused person being tried by a small but extremely select court. All traces of the Crusader had disappeared ; he was being spoken to in words such as had never been used to him before. And the prelate and the agnostic were in surprising harmony ; they seemed to agree even in the least important details.

There was an impromptu luncheon-party that day, and Mr. Sheridan did not go to the city. It is doubtful whether under the peculiar circumstances he would have been able to find his way there. Truth to say,

he was so absolutely dumbfounded at the course of affairs as to be deprived of all ideas. Everyone, moreover, seemed so happy and so certain about matters that he was hardly surprised when his wife suggested timidly that another guest should be invited to join the assembled company at the dinner-table. And Tom disappeared, to come back with a young man whom Mr. Sheridan had devoutly hoped never to see again. The Bishop of Bayswater, as was his wont, pronounced a peculiar kind of blessing, more secular than episcopal, on everyone in general and the happy couple in particular ; and so it happened that the betrothal of Cedric Readham and Ruth Sheridan took place in Mr. Sheridan's stronghold itself. In this same room the master of the house had been endeavouring for at least two hours to show cause why Cedric was the last man in the world to be received into the bosom of his family ; but the Crusader was making his last stand, and his friend the Bishop had ranged himself, so to speak, with the enemy. In other words, there was a kind of organized mutiny about him. The Bishop, looking more portly than ever, had spoken of the frailty of youth and the sound common-sense of maturity, quoting happily on no fewer than three occasions from Mr. Sheridan's own tracts ; at the same time, he was puffing very contentedly, despite the early hour, at one of Mr. Sheridan's best cigars. Winnington Orley, with his queer smile, had reminded him, too, of his own words : Ruth should marry whom she pleased, when she pleased. Now things had been settled, and there was really nothing more to be said. Poor bewildered Mr. Sheridan bowed his head, and tried to look happier than he was feeling. He loved his daughter, and it was just possible, he made himself

think, that his view of Readham had unconsciously become a biased one. Yet there were those literary blasphemies of his ! He could hardly be expected to forget them. Had they merely been the result of a miserably unfortunate state of mind which no longer existed ? The Bishop wished to think so—wished him to think so. He had spoken of Mark Denman as some mad spirit possessed of devils ; Mr. Sheridan, he remarked with something of a purr, would doubtless recollect what the early theologians had had to say upon the subject. And Mr. Sheridan was not altogether blind to the necessity of sacrificing individual desires to the wishes of the majority, whose rights he was so constantly upholding ; and when the Bishop of Bayswater happened to be in this majority, there was nothing to do but to put on a smiling countenance, and endeavour to keep a truly spiritual atmosphere round the general gaiety. The dromedary was brought out in honour of the occasion, and at the conclusion of dinner he felt it incumbent upon himself to make a short speech in which to explain his own position, and hoped that the glass of wine which had just been drunk would be instrumental in driving away all former misunderstandings.

Life, he urged, was full of mistakes, and those who might be actuated by the best of motives were as liable to err as those who might be working towards less noble ends. He would give his parental blessing, and could only hope that the young man who was to become his son-in-law—here Tom spilt a quantity of champagne by rapping on the table—that the young man would learn to follow in the ways which the Saviour of all mankind had pointed out to them in the Scriptures.

To Cedric himself this scene in the Sheridans' house

was but a continuation of the happy dream which had begun some weeks before. Tears stood in his eyes as he replied to Mr. Sheridan's speech. One was, he said, invariably sorry for youth's mistakes, whatever they might have been, and he felt unable to say to what an extent this wonderful day would affect his whole life. He could do nothing more than thank his friends. Without them he might still be . . . He stopped, and looked round. 'I might still be the dangerous person Mr. Sheridan thought me to be. I only wish,' he had added, 'that my mother could have been here.'

It would be a useless task to attempt a detailed description of that evening. One could only say that Cedric and Ruth were supremely happy, that in both their lives the past had been in a great measure blotted out; but that would be all. And when the Dowager came to Chelsea on the following day, the circle was complete. To her, as well as to the Mannings and Winnington Orley, it seemed that the great task of their lives had been performed. Lady Cardellan was radiant, and brought her brother to Mr. Sheridan, who received the diplomat with open arms. There could be no comparison between him and Sothernmere, and the master of the house began to perceive his own mistake. This knowledge only increased his admiration for the Bishop; though, in truth, that right reverend gentleman had done little but answer Ruth's summons, and, by dilating upon sundry virtues which he professed to have discovered in Readham, atone for the mistake which he could not deny had been shared alike by himself and Mr. Sheridan. The vicar of the parish, as well as Jack Barnett, put in an appearance, and they were the first of a stream of visitors. Mrs.

Sheridan's friends crowded round her. The Sunday callers began to assemble in Tite Street on weekdays, and the next fortnight took on the nature of a prolonged festival. Ruth herself could not see too many of her friends to whom to impart a faint idea of her happiness, and no one grudged her her joy. Miss Galston appeared almost daily, and occasionally wept. Mrs. Blagden suggested Abyssinia as a suitable place for the honeymooners, and offered to give them a number of introductions. The Baron d'Horloge became extremely friendly with Lord Loughton, and discovered the interesting fact that their families had intermarried in the eighteenth century. And Dr. Orley went back to his house and the little fairies with a glad heart. His efforts had been successful. He could approach the work that was still to be done with a conviction that the little holiday—for holiday it had been—had not been time wasted.

The only men whose absence was noted were Arthur Lacey and Lord Sothernmere; but Lacey was in the north, and on Sothernmere, of course, no one could ever rely.

It remains to record a little tea-party which Winington Orley gave in his study. Unlike most of these functions, however, there was only one guest who was decidedly above the age of most of the Enchanter's friends; for the guest was Lady Cardellan herself.

'What we all owe to you,' she said, 'will never be known.'

'I suppose I have committed a murder,' retorted Dr. Orley, laughing.

The Dowager stared.

'I rather hope I have killed a gentleman whose name is Mark Denman.'

'You knew him at all?' she asked.

'I read his books. They are not so clever as I had been led to suppose. They are well written, but that is about all. They are childish in parts, but they are not original. They are just the sort of books that a clever boy, who imagined himself in a world of his own, might write. When your nephew starts to write in earnest, Lady Cardellan, we may look for good things.'

'His poor mother used to say much the same,' said the Dowager, looking pleased. 'He created a person for himself. He moulded himself upon the plan of this Denman, and made himself miserable in consequence. I am not altogether surprised that he did so. Some of us are curious beings, you know, and my dear Cedie liked to imagine that the Byronic trait was strong in himself.'

'But that is over.' Winnington Orley was pouring out the tea. 'You have probably observed,' he went on, 'that a number of young people will not rely on what is really theirs, but must be poking their noses—their absurd noses—into holes and dungeons which have nothing to do with them. Your nephew liked to think of himself as the inhabitant of a dungeon, always conveniently forgetting that there was a very splendid garden into which he could step whenever he wanted to do so. Some of us may have no garden to step into, but when we have it, it is a sin to neglect it.'

There was a pause; Winnington Orley was looking out on his own little garden.

'And now that he is in the garden, do you think the dungeon is closed to him for ever?' She spoke rather wistfully.

Dr. Orley wheeled round with a jerk.

‘The actress?’

‘I have made inquiries. My brother has sifted matters to the bottom. It seems she is not quite the average person. We may have been cruel in that quarter. Cedric, no doubt, poor boy, was wholly in the wrong . . .’

‘She will find her garden, I hope,’ said Winnington Orley; ‘or if not, she will live beneath the shadow of the boundary wall. These things, I suppose, must be. They are rather sad, and yet history shows us that they are necessary.’

There was another pause.

‘I must show you a letter,’ said the Dowager suddenly. She took a paper from her pocket. ‘It might interest you.’

Winnington Orley read the following letter :

‘MY DEAR LADY,

‘I hear from your ladyship that Mr. Cedric has embarked on the all-important step as which all of us take in our lives, and I hereby subscribe my congratulations, both to Mr. C. and to your ladyship. The Lord works wonders, He do, and in making Mr. C., with humble respects, see the error of a young man’s ways, as I said to Puddock only this morning, we can only be thankful that the devil, as I says all along, is kicked down his own stairs. Puddock’s behaviour has not been satisfactory since your ladyship went to London, and the pig has died, after all. I make no doubt that it was Puddock’s fault. With the Lord’s blessing on your ladyship and Mr. C., though I never thought as to call it upon him, begging your ladyship’s pardon, your respectful.

‘SARAH PUDDOCK.’

'We are old friends, Sarah and I,' said the Dowager, 'but Sarah has little love for my nephew.'

'Then your nephew ought to be doubly pleased. The good lady ought to meet Mr. Sheridan. I think they may have something in common. But even she must be satisfied with Ruth.'

'She is all and more than I could have wished for Cedric. I feel she will make him strong. She will prevent a recurrence of those morbid ideas of his. How I wish his poor mother had lived to see her !'

Winnington Orley was stroking his beard. 'I still find her my little Wonder-Child,' he said solemnly.

'Perhaps my nephew is sharing your discovery,' remarked the Dowager.

Most of the older towns in Flanders end with startling abruptness. The streets with their closely-packed cottages come to a sudden termination, and the traveller in one step is outside the town. There are few, if any, suburbs to pass through before the country is reached, no roads marred by rows of similarly-built villas with their mathematical gardens and their ugly little gateways. While Ruth and her husband stayed at Bruges, they would walk out to a long mound which stood just north of the town, and, sitting in a little seat placed on the summit, would look out over the town. Few came to that isolated little seat. Occasionally a group of Flemish children would come and make the mound their playground ; once, indeed, a number of young soldiers brought a meal, and sat down in front of them, laughing over their food ; but for the most part Ruth and Cedric had the place to themselves. Other travellers did not trouble about this ugly heap of earth ; there was nothing much to see, and an equally grand

view could be obtained from a dozen other points of vantage ; besides, they were probably busy in the town itself, guide-book in hand, feverishly looking at and pretending to admire the accumulated treasures of five centuries.

But the mound with its unsheltered seat suited Cedric and his bride. They would sit in silence, and allow their thoughts to drift whither they would in a lazy enjoyment. It was Ruth's first visit to Flanders, and everything to her seemed one blaze of light. To see the paintings which made Bruges a veritable treasure-house, to examine the mediæval churches, to walk the wonderful old streets with Cedric to tell her stories, meant something that would not express itself in thought, much less in words. She could not gauge things ; the standard that had satisfied her in the past was gone. The very art, in which she was much more than a neophyte, seemed to have undergone a transfiguration, now that Cedric, no great artist himself, was with her to interpret it. It was as though her love for this man, and the art of all those great men of the past, who had given their best to the world, had become subtly blended together. And here on this seat with Cedric she would try to understand in full what had happened ; she would try to realize the meaning of her present life, and she would know of nothing save a desire to serve Cedric. Her ambitions had suddenly centred themselves round him. Whatever she might do, nowever she might think, there would always be the one desire to serve Cedric, to help him. Bells, sounding across the distance, seemed to express just a little of what she was feeling. There was a sensuous enjoyment in everything with him ; things away from him seemed dull, cold almost. She wondered idly

whether others had felt the same emotion. It was hard to believe that this might be so.

'It is as though one's intellect was being pushed into the background,' she said, as they were sitting in their favourite seat on the mound; 'as though something else were being thrust in front of us—something so wonderful as to be past our comprehension.'

He looked at her affectionately.

'But don't you think, Ruth, that love is showing much that was dark before? Aren't we understanding much that seemed to be well-nigh impossible before? I am sure I am. I feel so strong now, and you can't imagine what it is to feel strong after one has been weak for years. It's like being cured of a disease. I have never been healthy till now. Listen, Ruth, to the bells. They seem to be pealing out strength and happiness, and yet I used to think they were sad bells.'

'Oh, I just can't talk,' she said; and they sat in silence.

A little boy ran out of the street at the foot of the mound, and started to clamber up. Then he raised his eyes, and saw that the seat was occupied. For a moment he stood irresolute, and then started to run back again.

'I suppose the little chap wanted to be alone?' said Ruth.

'Alone?' repeated Cedric dreamily; he had hardly noticed the child. 'Alone? I should like to be alone with you always, just in a world by ourselves. Imagine a desert isle with just you and me on it! We should live for one another, and no one else.'

'You would want your books and things.'

'Do you think I should, Ruth? Well, perhaps I might want them, but we should want the same books.'

You will have to share my work now. We've killed Mr. Denman now, you know.'

There was a sudden drop of rain. Both instinctively looked into the heavens, but there was no cloud, only one expanse of blue. Another bell loomed through the air. Cedric saw his wife momentarily stiffen, and then shiver. Her eyes were turned to the east.

'Cold, dear?'

'No; I was thinking.' She looked into his face. 'I was thinking that I would be horribly ready to kill anyone who came between us—anyone who took what we've got from us. I'd kill them.'

Cedric did not speak. Another drop of rain touched his cheek.

'Shall we go in?' he said.

The little child saw them hurrying away.

The days passed quickly, and Bruges was left. Cedric took his wife to all those spots where he had been wont to idle away his time, working by fits and starts, bemoaning his own sorrows, seeing most things on a distorted plane. Now the little villages which had seemed before to fit in with his own melancholy moods by their very coldness and isolation appeared to him glad spots of civilization. His old landlords, prepared for 'the sad Englishman,' were astonished at the change; Madame, they said, had worked wonders.

They went south to France, and as winter succeeded autumn, journeyed through the Riviera. Here they met a host of English friends, and, perhaps for the first time since Cambridge days, Cedric began to take an interest in many matters which he had for long regarded with a contemptuous scorn. There was a possibility of enjoying to the full all social engagements now that Ruth was with him; and although he had thought

after the first days of married life that others could only come into their existence together in the unwelcome light of intruders, he now found that he welcomed them. It was pleasant to make these others feel his own and his wife's happiness ; it was a serene delight to know that one would stay with him when the others were gone. It was the presence of the mate that could give him that soothing sense of contentment, that could for ever banish those former ideas of loneliness and pariahdom. For Denmanism had done much to bring home to him the fact that a gulf separated himself from others, and it was only Ruth who had so gorgeously bridged over that gulf. Like a raft at the mercy of huge seas, he had been drifting hither and thither ; now there had come a guiding current, and he had been brought to a land where the proverbial milk and honey flowed in plenty. In his boyhood Cedric had been singularly free from even those small cares which sometimes disturb the youthful mind. He had taken his duties and his pleasures as they had come with a placidity which was typical of his stock. There was work to be done, there were games to be played ; some boys were his friends, others were not ; and if his career at Rugby had not been wholly free from those unpleasant incidents universally known as scrapes, which seem so necessary to the public schoolboy, his mind had refused to brood over them after the punishment, whatever it might be, had been administered. It was only after Lemonier and D'Arcy Vaughan and their kind had introduced him to their own particular cult, and had formed in him principles very much more sincere, however mistaken they might have been, than those which they themselves possessed, —it was only then that the habit of playing critic to

himself, to his own actions and emotions, had come to wreck in a great measure the healthful influence of five years at Rugby and one at Cambridge. And now that Ruth had become his wife, now that the Winnington Orleys of the world had shown him his own shortcomings, now that Denmanism, which had been the outcome of an intimacy with those worthless undergraduates with their poses and their conceits, had, he hoped, been laid in a strong coffin and placed out of human reach, Cedric unconsciously reverted to his former more healthy condition. There had come a serenity to take the place of that mental turmoil which had made the last few years of his life so full of pain and unhappiness, and once again he was prepared to enjoy life as he had enjoyed it in Rugby days. It was this faculty which had made it possible for him to forget the incident—so he might have termed it—of Olive Ranger. She and her kind, he would have said, belonged to another world. He might have expressed contrition for his past conduct, but, on the other hand, there would have been no lack of excuses. Moreover, such atonement as was very well possible had been made.

They journeyed farther south to Piedmont and Lombardy. Ruth was enthusiastic over the splendid paintings of Gaudenzio Ferrari in the old-world towns of Novara, Varallo, Vercelli. So from them to the town of Milan, with its treasures from the marvellous brush of Da Vinci, its architecture, Bramante's work, its quaint gardens with the little shrubs and fig-trees abounding everywhere. So to Pisa, with its cathedral, Buschetto's masterpiece, the leaning tower, the sculpture, all the wonders of southern art. Ruth eagerly recalled her London lectures, and dilated on the art-

history of these northern towns of Italy, the Greek element to be seen in their mural paintings, the great Desiderius—afterwards Pope Victor VII.—that school of sculpture, founded by Buschetto in 1066, which ultimately produced Nicolo Pissani, the influence of earlier Christianity upon art, the meaning of symbolism and ornament.

So on to Rome, Ravenna, Naples. Theirs was a pilgrimage of joy.

CHAPTER XXII

AN UNEXPECTED DÉNOUEMENT

LORD LOUGHTON had accepted an invitation to a house-party at Temsworth, a little property which he had presented to his nephew, and he journeyed down to the Herefordshire village in company with Arthur Lacey. The two had met in London. Aunt Janet, of course, had been accorded an invitation, but was away in the north of England staying with a duchess, and did not feel disposed, so she wrote to her husband, to come south in order to meet a host of Cedric's disreputable friends. She had met Mrs. Readham in London after the honeymoon, and had almost immediately recognised the fact that between that young lady and herself there was little if anything in common.

The diplomatist and the playwright were alone in the compartment.

'You know my nephew well?' began Lord Loughton.

'I regret to say I do not,' replied Lacey. He was playing with a magazine, rolling one of the corners of its cover between his thumb and finger. 'I have known Mrs. Readham for a much longer time.' The dramatist had been immensely amused at Sothernmere's behaviour in Manchester; it had savoured so much, he thought, of the professional mountebank. Nor had he been in the least surprised when his lordship

desired to undertake another continental trip in company with a lady from Liverpool. He had accepted the inevitable on learning of the proposed marriage between Readham and Miss Ruth, mentally determining to accord the young gentleman a somewhat closer examination than he had bestowed upon him heretofore. If he thought at all of Olive Ranger, it was not in connection with Readham. His experience had taught him to believe that much which suggested the romantic was in reality nothing of the sort, only, in sooth, a chance example of Nature's more sordid tricks. His latest play did not require an Olive Ranger, and a casual query addressed to Mr. Davenport, and answered vaguely, on the subject of the actress's whereabouts had satisfied him.

'I have seldom been better pleased,' the old gentleman continued, 'than I was when I was informed of my nephew's contemplated marriage. He was an odd kind of fellow. We could never quite make him out from the time when he left Cambridge. The University, my dear sir, is responsible for a very great deal of harm as well as for a very great deal of good. My nephew went to Cambridge an honest sort of boy, not particularly brainy, you understand, but just the average healthy-minded freshman. He came down moody and spoilt, with his head filled with a multitude of idiotic ideas, and his hand only too ready to . . . er . . . to wield a very unwise pen. The family was shocked, sir, shocked. But now things are different, and marriage with a really sensible girl has brought him to his proper mind.' His lordship made pause for a moment.

'I could not say too much in Mrs. Readham's favour,' declared Lacey.

'That is gratifying,' said Lord Loughton. He removed his hat and placed it on the rack. 'Yes,' he went on reflectively, 'we had anxious times with him. I may say I had an anxious time with him myself. My duties abroad, you know, do not allow me to be very frequently in England, but I came over shortly before the wedding to find my nephew entangled with some impossible woman on the stage. No offence, you understand,' he added hastily, 'but . . .'

Lacey murmured words abstractedly.

'Yes, with some fifth-rate actress. Of course, I need hardly say I put an end to the business at once. In these matters a little diplomacy and a cheque—small or large, as the case may require—are sufficient to bring everything to a speedy conclusion. A little tact and . . . well'—he shrugged his shoulders—'there is little else to be done.'

'Of course,' agreed the dramatist. 'One meets with this sort of affair every day of one's life. And it seldom comes to anything. I believe, by the way, the actress of whom you speak once acted for me.' He was looking out of the window. 'You saw her yourself, Lord Loughton?'

'No; I met my nephew before that was necessary. I confess a meeting would have been extremely distasteful, but I was spared that . . . er . . . but it is all right now.' He suddenly realized that he was imparting much of the family history that had better remain secret.

'Yes,' said Lacey, 'a little tact, as you say, and these things are invariably all right. I am looking forward to my visit immensely. The excitements of Manchester and a new play are over for me, and here I

am coming down to a country mansion with the intention of doing nothing but laze about. It is perfectly delightful.'

'A holiday,' said Lord Loughton, pleased that the conversation had turned, 'is of course delightful. My nephew, I believe,' he continued, 'has quite a small party. I am eager to see him play host, and, by Jove! I hope he will do it better than my son does it in Paris. It is a responsibility, sir, which entails some amount of unselfishness.'

The train ran into the little village station that was their destination. Bags were given to valets, papers collected; there were bowings and scrapings to Lord Loughton from the whole of the resident railway staff, and the two men stepped outside to find Cedric holding the reins in a trap. He looked well and happy, and his uncle observed as he was being helped up that the Continent was a tonic, sir—a veritable tonic—a statement with which Lacey expressed himself in entire agreement.

'And whom shall we meet?' asked Lord Loughton, as Cedric drove them through a stretch of woods.

'Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan, Aunt Evelyn, the Mannings, and Winnington Orley. Ruth is delighted that Dr. Orley has come. He has been with us some days, and does little but feed the animals.'

'He has become, in fact, thoroughly bucolic,' suggested Lacey.

Cedric said the holiday was doing his godfather-in-law all the good in the world. He whipped up the horse. They had come to the summit of a hill, and a vast country was shown to them. Lacey began to chatter about the scenery; Lord Loughton compared the skies of England and of Italy in the manner he

considered would be most acceptable to the dramatist. A smile was playing round Cedric's mouth. It had just come home to him that he no longer saw the evil in men, but the good. That, in part, was explaining why things had become tinged with a new lustre. At Chipton he had never seen himself playing host, country-squire fashion; now nothing seemed more natural or more agreeable. At Temsworth, which under Ruth's directions had been fitted up so superbly, every little object recalled her taste, every room bore witness to her adorable qualities. Their pilgrimage of joy had led to this Herefordshire paradise. The air to him seemed extraordinarily clean, good to breathe. He talked to his uncle on the little things connected with the estate, and Lacey became silent through wonder. Few men, he thought, underwent such a change as this quaint host of his; but then, as he remembered, he had never before given sufficient attention to him. He had to confess that his own impressions of Readham had probably been wrong. Such changes as he was imagining to have happened did not really occur. A thought of Olive Ranger was banished hurriedly.

Ruth met them at the door, surrounded by dogs, and Lacey's wonder grew. Was this woman that mischievous girl he had joked and chatted with on Sundays past for years? He made a mental resolve to re-read Coventry Patmore on the first occasion. Yet Ruth had not forgotten her jokes nor her odd little remarks, so many of which had, all unknown to her, been drafted into one or other of Lacey's cup-and-saucer plays. He did not understand the change.

'You look extremely well,' he said prosaically; 'that is about all I can find to say about you. But I

believe you would still go to a football match, if you had the chance.'

'Of course I should,' laughed Ruth, 'and my husband would not object.'

Mr. Sheridan approached them. He greeted Lord Loughton as a dear relative. Since the unfortunate affair in which Lord Sothernmere had taken a part, Mr. Sheridan had been nervous in Lacey's presence; but the dramatist was not a man to allow anything of the sort to spoil his friendship with the Sheridans in the least degree, and on his return to Chelsea he had behaved as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Mr. Sheridan, on the other hand, could not forget—at any rate, for some time—that the dramatist had introduced the peer into his house, and no amount of laughter on Lacey's part could quite remove a certain stiffness of manner in him. But he shook hands cordially enough now, and hoped that Lacey had had a pleasant journey from town. A week in the country with Ruth and her husband had removed any doubts he may have had about Cedric, who had long seen fit to make sundry verbal concessions to his father-in-law. Did the subject of tracts occur in conversation, it was no longer his wish to give utterance to those ideas of the past which, if they were not entirely forgotten, seemed now to be inept, if not actually bigoted. And at dinner on the first evening of his arrival Lacey could not help observing how Mr. Sheridan was adapting himself to his new surroundings. The Crusader that had been now talked to Winnington Orley about the important subject of chickens. He expressed a desire to emulate Mr. Gladstone and cut down trees—a practice which, Lacey remarked, satisfied the conscience as well as

the muscles, inasmuch as it was a form of useful work. The Dowager beamed happily on those around her. She had never imagined that Cedric's marriage could mean such wonderful enjoyment to herself.

'I can go back to Chipton,' she had said to her nephew as he was leaving for the Continent, 'absolutely content.'

'And you will help us to set our house in order?' Cedric thought he had never loved her so dearly.

'Of course, dear.'

Now, with Ruth sitting at the table, she was reminded of former scenes when Constance Readham had been brought to her own father. She saw in the present festivities echoes of those times when Cedric's mother had delighted them all. Cedric had swerved from the path of the Readhams, she liked to think, but he had been brought back again, and to recall that wonderful London campaign of hers was a never-ending source of delight. She felt a warrior looking back on victories.

Within the next few days Lacey was forced to the conclusion that he had been piloted into the midst of a fourth act with its attendant good fortunes. The curtain could now be rung down with decency upon hero and heroine, who were to live happily ever afterwards. Sothernmere, as villain, had disappeared temporarily, and would require his careful attention at some future date, but for the present he need hardly be considered. The dramatist was astonished at himself and everybody else. Things went so smoothly; everyone was in harmony with the surroundings; there was not a single discordant note—a fact which with the presence of Mr. Sheridan became something akin to a phenomenon. Lacey left for London with the firm conviction that Cedric and Ruth had succeeded

in playing the ideal couple without being in the least ridiculous.

The Mannings enjoyed themselves no less than the others. Cedric's marriage had been the means of allowing Tom to fall into the belief that he was an accomplished match-maker, and, as such, a very useful member of society. He helped Mr. Sheridan to chop down a number of small shrubs, and confided to Blanche that Winnington Orley, when you knew him, wasn't so mysterious as you imagined. He had been given the opportunity of airing his views on public schools, and gave it as his opinion that an athletic education brought with it a general store of useful knowledge.

He said good-bye to Cedric with much regret.

'Sorry you must go,' said Cedric; 'but it's only till the next time.'

'Yes.' Tom was holding his friend's hand. 'What a rotter you used to be!' he said suddenly.

'Rotter?'

'Yes,' replied Tom. 'Since I've known Dr. Orley I see that cleverness doesn't mean . . . er . . . well, the Lemonier sort of business.' He had been wanting to tell his host this momentous discovery for some days.

Cedric pressed his hand. They were walking across the hall.

'My dear boy,' called Blanche from the trap, 'do hurry; we shall miss the train.'

'Well, good-bye, old man.'

'Good-bye, Cedric.'

Cedric went back to the library. The Sheridans had gone the day before. Only the Dowager was left of their little party. Dr. Orley was back in his study working. Lady Cardellan was wanted in Chipton.

Puddock's behaviour, according to his wife, had been so atrocious as to merit some signal rebuke from the mistress of Chipton Hall, but the Dowager lingered on with Cedric and Ruth. She was loth to leave this new-found happiness. No words could express her thoughts about these two happy children—they were children to her. And as the days passed, Cedric began to understand what his aunt was feeling, and urged her to stay with him. Ruth, too, thought the Dowager just the dearest old lady she had ever known, and was sorry for Lord Loughton when she contrasted Aunt Evelyn with Aunt Janet.

'I'm thankful,' Cedric said to her once, 'that Aunt Janet does not like me.'

'Or me, for that matter,' laughed Ruth. 'Our poor uncle has a bad time.'

'And never murmurs,' said Cedric. 'We must really accept his invitation to go to the Alps this year.'

'With Aunt Janet?'

'She is too busy or too townified for the Alps. At any rate, she never goes higher than the Rigi. I really believe that my dear old uncle developed his taste for the higher Alps when he found that Aunt Janet preferred the lowlands.'

They were sitting together in the garden. It was not summer yet, but the day was warm, and trees were sprouting cheerfully. They saw the Dowager cross the lawn. She was carrying a letter.

'For you, Cedic, forwarded by Sarah with a long explanation. It seems to have been lying behind a chest in the hall for some time. Puddock, of course, is credited with its disappearance. I hope it isn't of importance. But of course not; you would have heard.'

She gave him the letter. He glanced at the envelope, and put it in his pocket.

'Written in December,' he said, with a forced laugh. 'Poor old Puddock! always blamed for everything. However, this is not important, I think, so it doesn't matter. Well, isn't the garden lovely, auntie? Summer will be early this year. Look at the dogs. They think it's summer already.' He was speaking quickly. Ruth stared at him. He seemed to have become nervous. The Dowager was looking at the dogs.

'I have never seen a dog look lazier,' she averred.

'Lazy is not the word. That dog wallows in the sun, and does nothing else.'

'We all do that frequently,' said Ruth.

'A good laze,' said Cedric, 'would, in the words of Uncle George, act as a tonic.'

'And that reminds me,' said the Dowager, 'that I have definitely decided to go to Chipton at the end of the week.'

'Puddock the cause?' asked Cedric.

'Hardly. But there are many things which I have neglected all too long, and I have stayed three weeks longer than I had intended as it is. You will begin to look on me as a permanent fixture.'

'So much the better,' said Ruth. 'We three are very happy together.'

The Dowager looked grateful.

Something had happened. Ruth noticed it, but said nothing. She was waiting for Cedric to speak. The Dowager noticed it, and thought that Cedric might be fretting to be alone with his wife. Once or twice she had caught her nephew with that old-time look of

conscious sadness on his face. But she said nothing, and when Cedric drove her to the station, and told her that Ruth and himself would soon be demanding an invitation to Chipton, she thought he had recovered his usual cheerfulness.

The days following, however, made it clear to Ruth that something was wrong with her husband. Time after time she found him making efforts to be natural with her, and each occasion hurt her the more. Once she had gone so far as jestingly to remark that his glum face showed how tired of her he was becoming, but his haggard look—a look that would not be disguised—had bade her be patient until he chose to speak.

That he would have given much to have spoken to her, who of all merited his fullest confidence, Cedric knew well, as he was also forced to admit to himself that every day, every hour, was making the task harder, more fraught with possible tragedies. And whilst the new healthful ideas which had been filling his brain until the arrival of that belated letter made it clear to him that both love and duty were showing a straight course, older influences, the influences which had led in the past to all his dismal expressions in the world of letters, seemed to be crowding back into the nooks and corners of his brain, forming an unhappy medley, a chaos out of which nothing would come. He prayed to be freed from these new manacles—prayed to a something Divine for a few day's calm which might show him how unnecessary it would be to tell Ruth anything. To spare her pain, even at a great cost to himself, was, he liked to think, his sole purpose. Yet he knew that these new thoughts were selfish ones, unworthy of the better man he had come to consider himself. The lustre had indeed gone from things, and yet all this

worry, this torture, had followed upon nothing more than a single sentence, scribbled in a minute, unbacked by any evidence, quite alone ! What if it were to prove all untrue ! What if he were merely undergoing a kind of blackmail ! With Ruth in possession of all the facts, the opinion of others could, he thought, hardly matter at all ; still, he was silent. There could be no real blackmail, he told himself ; Olive might ask for things ; it would never be blackmail to him. His mind, moreover, could not reconcile Olive with that worst of all crimes. To an audience of the trees about him he told the story of his own caddishness, and in the hissing of the leaves heard a reproachful answer. Olive, said the leaves, was not in reality what he had tried to console himself with thinking she might be. His uncle had told him that she was one of many ; Ruth, with her knowledge of what this actress had once been, had hinted so much. Cedric thought the leaves, with their pitiless sibilant wailing, were crying a different story. Yet he tried to force himself to put belief in his uncle's words. It seemed almost easy to do that with the knowledge of the conscience-salving which would probably ensue.

Sometimes, as he was wandering through the fine old-world garden at Temsworth, it seemed to him that that fateful letter had been lost for so long by the interference of some kind providence with a definite purpose. It had been delivered to him, but only to be ignored—a sign that in the new happiness he was not to forget the dull dreariness of the past ; a sign that there had been a lesson.

'I shall do what is best,' he shouted at his audience ; yet he knew that he was acting to himself.

Once again the case of that Cedric Readham of whom

he knew so little was filling his mind. Once again he was living almost entirely in a lonesome world, which he pictured grand and awe-inspiring, with precipitous rocks and little else—a world into which Ruth and all that belonged to her could not be brought.

Callers came from the neighbourhood, people whom Cedric in other circumstances would have been so glad to know. He could find no longer that wonderful pleasure in seeing his wife admired; everything had become stagey, unnatural, horrible. And he was convinced that Ruth's mind was made up: she would say nothing until he chose to speak.

'She is waiting for me,' he said.

From a paradise Temsworth had become a purgatory, or something worse.

A week after the Dowager had gone back to Chipton, to the great satisfaction, be it said, of Puddock—he looked upon her as a guardian angel, who militated in gentle fashion against his wife's more pungent observations—Ruth proposed a drive in the country. Cedric exerted himself to forget things, and so far succeeded as to present anything but a miserable appearance in the small dogcart, which had been one of Lady Cardellan's wedding presents.

They drove off through narrow country lanes, and Cedric felt better. He spoke without effort. Ruth talked of their neighbours. They lunched in a tiny orchard set out as an open-air restaurant. A little girl brought them a basket of fruit, and told them how she had made the basket herself. It was her fourth attempt, she said, and father had given her a whole sixpence. Husband and wife glanced involuntarily at one another; both detected the same look of pain.

'We should always lunch together in this way,' said Ruth.

Cedric was fervent in his reply.

'It is a kind of continuation to our honeymoon,' Ruth went on, looking into the green blaze in front of them—'our wonderful honeymoon.' She turned shyly to her husband. 'We must always be in the midst of our honeymoon, Cedie, my darling.'

'Always,' murmured Cedric abstractedly. Then a sudden glow appeared on his face. 'Always, my own Ruth—one long honeymoon. Of course ; what else ?' He took her hands in his own, and Ruth saw the smile of a happy man. The beats of her heart seemed on a sudden to have trampled upon her wordless suspicions, leaving her forgetful of them. That smile of her husband's which seemed to be so peculiar, so wondrous an expression of Cedric's love for herself, had come again like a sun rising out of the darkness, and that was enough.

For the rest of the day Cedric to her was the Cedric of Bruges, of Ravenna, of Naples. And Cedric himself had ceased to worry, for his mind was made up.

He found a letter from the Dowager on his return, and took it into his study. Ruth had gone upstairs. The letter from Chipton was thick, but there was an enclosure. Cedric's hand shook as he saw the handwriting on the note which the Dowager informed him had come only that morning. He opened it, and as he read the few lines, a deep flush settled on his face. He knew he was thankful that he had not opened the letter in his wife's presence, but a throbbing in his head seemed to be stopping all further thought. Yet it was clear that here was a second link in some chain of shame—a link cast by this other woman.

'My son and hers!'

He groaned out the words in pitiful fashion. A child had come to mock at his little paradise. Ah, how hateful it was to look upon anything that was his and not equally Ruth's! How doubly hateful when he could not bring himself to tell her the truth! He laid the letter down, and tried to calm himself. This second letter was different from the first; it was vaguely threatening. Cedric thought he detected another's work besides Olive's in its composition. It hinted at stern measures if he did not show himself.

'It's Nemesis,' he said aloud, and then burst into a little laugh. All involuntarily his mind travelled back to Cambridge days, to a certain debate held by the 'Openhearts' on this very question of Nemesis. A survival of superstition, someone had said jeeringly, to be found only in the imagination of those who could boast of no strength save that which others gave them. The non-existence of anything in the nature of a Nemesis which implied nothing human, nothing reasonable, had been almost a postulate to those 'Openhearts,' and Cedric recalled a speech of D'Arcy Vaughan's, in which that gentleman had expatiated on the 'fairy tales of civilization.' Nemesis, he had maintained, resembled the feeding-bottle, inasmuch as both were thought to be indispensable to a well-trained nurse; and Cedric thought of his own words spoken on the same occasion. What Nemesis there was existed only in the morbid imagination of those who liked to pose as the martyrs of this world. Big words, he thought now, but how poor, how meaningless! He recalled, too, a passage on this very subject in *God the Jester*. And now he had to determine for himself whether his own words had been true

or no, whether Denmanism was the product of a diseased imagining, or the cult of God's cruel truth. Was the birth of this child of his the work of some spirit of Justice, or was it merely a hideous coincidence? It was characteristic of him that for a little while interest in such a momentous problem drove his own connection with it out of mind. The 'case' had assumed greater proportions. The elements had been set to work, to what end he did not know; but he was, he told himself, in immediate conflict with Nature. He stood alone, like some Dante at the gates of a hell which was very far from being mythical. Then on a sudden he became humble. It was mad to be regaled with such thoughts. He was only one of many.

'Oh, Ruth! Ruth!' he cried, 'you would understand, but I daren't speak. My darling—oh, my darling, why couldn't we have welcomed our love at first instead of playing a game?' A third time he read the letter from Olive, and tried to picture her as the writer. How could she have written the thing?

An impulse led him to tear it up, and as he threw down the pieces, he remembered Ruth's words at lunch. Their life was to be a honeymoon. He must let things slide whither they would, and go abroad with his wife. That was the only way. Ruth must be left to gather what knowledge his own behaviour might have given her. This was one of the times in a man's life when the coward had perforce to be welcomed, when valour so-called was nothing but recklessness, when a knee had to be bent before the fates, when pride, or whatever it was which had come to be called by that name, was to conquer everything.

'We must leave England at once,' he whispered,

finding consolation in the very contemplation of the future he proposed for himself and his wife.

As has been remarked by more than one writer, there is a certain justice in things mundane ; a postulate which has sometimes led to the theory that the hell of the early poets is nowhere but on our own world, in our midst. A man does wrong, and whether we be of those who believe or of those who scoff, we hardly doubt that an act which is hurtful to men is but half of a whole. It is only such 'Openhearts' as may be found amongst ourselves who would see in the two halves shown upon one plate nothing but one of those coincidences, hideous or otherwise, which as often as not occur at the precise moment when they may be least expected or desired.

Cedric Readham was a man who at all times, in all circumstances, strove to be sincere with himself. Yet that he failed at times in such an endeavour was shown by the fact of his being satisfied with the new plan of action, so far as it had been formulated. Ruth was to be told nothing, because the mere telling would hurt her—probably hurt her very much more than was the case as things now stood. They were to travel abroad because only by such a scheme would the least amount of unhappiness follow. By an almost pitifully constructed line of argument, Cedric was able to sit down at table that evening in a state of comparative peace of mind. He had resolved to tell Ruth so much as would alleviate her anxiety without exciting further doubts. The fraud, he told himself, if fraud it was, should be justified by his desire for her happiness. He had crushed any questions upon this point.

'We've had a glorious day, dear,' he said, 'and I've got over my worries.' The servants had left the room.

‘I’ve been waiting for you to tell me things.’ Ruth spoke boldly.

Cedric did not pretend to be surprised. ‘Don’t you remember, dear, how prone I have always been to worry myself over things? I have been bothered by . . .’

‘The woman.’ The utterance of the two words in itself caused her relief.

‘Of course you guessed. Oh, Ruth,’ he continued almost wildly, ‘I want only to see you happy. I want to be with you, alone with you, away from everyone. Let us go away; I can’t bear being in England. We must go right away. This woman—she loves me, I suppose, in her way, and she wants me. She has appealed to me. I can’t explain to you, Ruth, dear, what I am feeling, but you understand a little? I have been a blackguard, yet when I met her I could hardly have known . . .’

‘Dear, don’t think of such things. I love you more than I can say. Whatever has happened can make no difference to me—must make no difference to you. We’ll go away—to Italy, anywhere you like, so that we can just be alone with each other. My own dear husband, will you never understand that nothing can make a difference? You must no longer brood in the silly old way, with your fads of Mark Denman, and all your little worries. If your own wife is not with you to make you happy, to make you see all that is best and noblest in life, who is to do it? Cedie, Cedie, my own husband!’

She had risen from her seat at the table, and was sobbing over his shoulders.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her everything, yet, as so often before, a stray thought had come to

mind unwanted to alter things. A fleeting memory of the Mannings passed through his brain, and whilst tears stood in his eyes, he could not but ask himself whether such simpletons as they could enjoy such love as this. He said nothing, and a moment later they had gone to Ruth's boudoir.

Preparations for their departure were hurriedly made. Cedric had by now fully persuaded himself that a prolonged stay abroad would solve the whole difficulty. Olive's letters would in time answer themselves, and he was to send her a cheque. If he thought at all of his child, it was as of something not directly connected with himself. As yet he had no sure proof of its existence. If he was allowing himself to be black-mailed, then, he mused, he was only paying for the child's keep.

Ruth had regained her usual cheerfulness. She had written a long letter to her mother, explaining how she and her husband found they had not yet had a long enough honeymoon. She could not tell her, she wrote, how happy she was. Mrs. Sheridan's eyes read dimly, as she sat with the letter in the drawing-room, less used now that Ruth was gone, and perhaps in Mr. Sheridan's estimation, more in keeping with its name. Ruth had married happily, she was thinking, and that meant that the chief aim of her life had been fulfilled. Mr. Sheridan, on hearing the news, caused his eyebrows to rise once or twice; he questioned the advisability, he said, of a life of gaiety. In his eyes travel on the Continent was more or less synonymous with a sojourn at Monte Carlo or other places where amusements of a particularly secular and perhaps undignified nature were the order of the day. In inviting his children to stay one night beneath his roof, he was actuated by an earnest

desire of impressing upon them the importance of moderation in all things. There was work to be done, he told his wife—work which travel on the Continent might easily leave undone.

So Cedric and his wife arrived one morning in Chelsea, and spent most of the day explaining their plans. Winnington Orley had been notified of their visit, and duly appeared at tea-time. The Mannings dined at Tite Street, and Tom amused the company with an account he had paid to the Bishop of Bayswater.

‘All bishops,’ announced Tom, ‘should be portly.’

‘And where,’ quoth Ruth at the dinner-table, ‘is my dear beloved dromedary?’ A plain bowl of flowers adorned the centre of the board.

‘I am grieved to say . . .’ began the master of the house.

‘He is lost for ever,’ said Mrs. Sheridan, suppressing a smile. ‘Two days ago he fell with all his belongings from the pantry sill right into the area. We found him past all redemption.’

‘It belonged to my grandfather,’ observed Mr. Sheridan mournfully. ‘Another . . . er . . .’

‘Relic of the past. He must have been a wicked dromedary. All wicked dromedaries die awful deaths.’ It was Ruth who spoke in her old jesting tones. She was wonderfully happy now, and this meal with her family had somehow taken on the features of a wedding breakfast. The clouds had lifted, and on the morrow she and her husband were to wander off into new lands. It had seemed to her that morning, as Cedric had helped her into the train, that one of life’s corners had been passed. The future was to hold nothing but joys. And so she could chat and joke, and tell innumerable stories of the ill-fated dromedary, the while even her

father had perforce to laugh. But at the end of dinner he was moved to express the hope that his children, whilst enjoying the greatest measure of felicity, would take their allotted share in the world's work with light hearts and willing hands.

Blanche and her husband returned to Sloane Street happy in the knowledge that their share in bringing about the marriage had been no small one.

Winnington Orley wrote to the Dowager.

An unexpected storm burst over the south of England on the following day. Mrs. Sheridan counselled a further stay in London, but Cedric did not hide his eagerness to leave England at once, and Ruth endorsed her husband's wishes. The sea, however, was so rough at Dover that the cross-Channel service had been temporarily suspended. Showers of rain fell at intervals, and black clouds rolled across the skies in one long procession. Fierce winds swept up angry breakers over the new harbour works. Towards the afternoon hailstones strewed the town, and in the distance away over to the east the boom of thunder was borne across the hills.

'England at its worst to bid us good-bye,' observed Ruth philosophically. 'Well, we must submit.'

They went to the Lord Warden, and engaged rooms for the night.

An early dinner over, Ruth announced that the thunder had given her a headache, and went to bed. Cedric strolled into the lounge, and began to look about him. He was almost absurdly annoyed at this delay. It seemed that difficulties were ever to be in his way; and he found himself wishing that he had followed Mrs. Sheridan's advice, and remained in London until

the weather was better. He lit a cigar, and walked up to a commissionaire.

‘Raining still?’ he asked.

‘No, sir, but it looks pretty bad.’

‘No boat will leave to-night, I suppose?’

‘No, sir. The companies don’t like this sort of weather overmuch.’

‘I should think not.’

‘I hears as how there’s been a bit of a smash-up over Claniston way.’

‘Claniston?’ Cedric started uneasily. Of course, this explained his annoyance. He was but four or five miles away from the woman and his child.

‘How odd!’ he thought. What if she knew that he was so near her? And the child that he had never seen—the child from which he was hurrying—was probably lying in its little cot just beyond the great gaunt hill which he could see now as he stood by the window. He moved away from the man, and went to another window. A few lights in the harbour, others flickering across the horizon, showed him an angry black sea. Dull sounds reached his ears as he strained his eyes for a possible ship.

A few minutes later he was standing outside the hotel. The place seemed deserted. A fierce wind nearly swept him off his feet. He was obliged to pull his cap well down over his eyes. Once again his thoughts were of this child of his, separated from him by so small a space. For some ten minutes he stood by the porch, and then on a sudden looked at his watch. It was just upon nine o’clock. The wind had begun to drop, and the sky seemed a little greyer. He started to walk down the road leading to the docks. Was this but another coincidence, he was asking him-

self, this imprisonment at Dover ? He quickened his footsteps. As he skirted the edge of the docks, his mind was still running on the same subject. *A son of his own !* It seemed almost incredible. And his wife, his own Ruth, and this other woman, were separated by no more than five miles !

With no clear purpose he walked along the parade, up the Dover hill, past the well-known lighthouses, and then from the top of the cliffs, where the wind was strong and drops of rain were wetting his cheeks, he saw Claniston.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA

THE townsman thrust temporarily from his accustomed surroundings, from the dirt which the town seems to breed from its very smoke, from the crowds that swarm the streets, from the noise and clatter produced by a myriad of interests, into a diminutive village with its single street and six or seven hundred inhabitants, is in a measure on the same plane as a fish out of water. Yet there will generally come a time, and that, too, in the near future, when he will recognise that much he had thought to be peculiar to the town is in reality nothing of the sort. The village will have its cliques, its characters, its myriads of interests, and the only difference will be that between the giant and the dwarf. And so it is that the rules which apply to a community of a million of souls may very well apply to one of a thousand, and, just as in London there are many whose lives and whose livelihoods are known to none but themselves, so in Claniston, which is little more than a hamlet, there have from the earliest times been one or two who have earned the more or less unsavoury title of 'close uns.'

For the past few years a certain John Drew had been living on the outskirts of Claniston. Within a month of his arrival in the place, most of the younger genera-

tion had made his acquaintance in one way or another, and if the elders showed but small inclination to allow the newcomer with his sly ways—they had called him sly from the moment when they learnt that he had purchased a small bungalow outside the village—into the sacred precincts of the parish Council room, they had to admit that ‘he had a way with him.’ It began to be whispered abroad that Mr. Drew was an ‘agent,’ but further nothing much was said. The village lads seldom spoke of him, though they admitted enjoying more than one pleasant evening in his sitting-room. Nor were the girls of the place—a dull, stupid set, on the whole—exempt from his welcome. The bungalow became a meeting-place for quite a fourth of the Claniston community, but Mr. Drew’s guests seemed to have obtained some of their host’s ‘closeness,’ and the exact ceremonial observed at these meetings was on no occasion divulged. Yet it was noted by several that certain lads had more than their usual amount of pocket-money to spend in the two or three shops in the village, or at the fairs and circuses which from time to time were coming in from neighbouring towns. It was observed, too, that the evening papers began to be bought in large quantities, more especially during the summer months—a fact which suggested to the astute mind of Mr. Blogg, who was postmaster and incidentally the local Whiteley, that neighbour Drew had something to do with the racecourse. He received an unusual amount of wires, many of which were so curiously worded as to leave Mr. Blogg to suppose that messages of greater import than appeared from the words themselves were being thereby conveyed. Moreover, Mr. Drew was the recipient of great quantities of letters despatched from various parts of the country, and

occasionally registered. In the words of Mr. Blogg, he was nothing more nor less than a 'nigma.'

However enigmatical he might be, there could be no question about his popularity with those of the villagers who prided themselves upon their sporting interests ; and whatever might be his business, he joined in the games and diversions of Claniston with enthusiasm and a ready purse.

Among Mr. Drew's guests had been numbered Olive Ranger. Before she had left her Kentish home to go on the stage, her choice of friends had, of course, not been restricted to that division of the community which amongst its social inferiors went by the name of the gentry. Few girls, in fact, had obtained such a wide popularity among the village lads, some of whom on her return would have been only too pleased to continue upon the same terms with her as of old. Mr. Drew, in particular, appeared eager for an invitation to her cottage, but regarded Cedric as a bar to anything in the nature of their former intimacy. If Olive herself was annoyed at meeting this man, she had never said a word to Cedric upon the subject. It was only natural, he had considered on one or two occasions, that many should remember her. Others, too, had remarked on her return, and a certain comment was passed between the scandalmongers of the place. As it happened, however, her return coincided with another matter of greater import to the village. This was the letting of a fine old house, empty for some score of years, to the Right Honourable the Lord Glinn, the fortunate possessor of a peerage which was then five years old. The behaviour of the Lady Glinn and her two daughters had afforded sufficient matter to please the most exacting of the local gossips. And so

Cedric's arrival had passed unnoticed by almost all save, indeed, Mr. Drew, whose bungalow stood at no great distance from Olive's cottage. Olive and Cedric led such a quiet life, buried away in the little valley, whither no one with business in the village ever came, that, with the exception of Mr. Drew himself, a few farm-hands, and a coastguardsman or two who remembered her, no one saw them.

Once, indeed, settled in her cottage, Olive had few thoughts but to see Cedric content and to enjoy herself in his company. She began to laze through life in an easy and perhaps sensuous calm. With Sothernmere and the others she had, as it were, been on her guard. Her father, it is true, had educated her to the best of his ability, but his own life for the most part had been spent amongst men and women who lacked the taste and refinement which seem to be the privilege of the few. His career, too, checked early, had been no clean one. A man of weak will, he had allowed a mind naturally alert to become sluggish, the while he had been pampering his body in the miserable, puny fashion which alone of all was open to him. If Olive had any awe for her mother, it was for the name alone, for Mrs. Ranger had been a nonentity. Olive had witnessed her father's wretched withering away—that was almost the only way of describing a painful decay—and had unconsciously become no alien to his less dangerous proclivities. The keen, cold air outside their tiny home, the winds that so often raged over this corner of England, the inexplicable powers of that laving of mind which the sea seems to possess—these had been the antidotes, the barriers, which her father had unfortunately been able to surmount with so little difficulty. It was as though that wonderful mother of

waves had come to take the place of Olive's own mother.

There were traits in Olive's character which had hitherto been latent as much from chance as from conscious efforts towards refinement. The sea, as Nature's nurse, had been cast off at her father's death, and life away from Claniston had rendered new strivings imperative. For defence, even for attack, new armour had become necessary, and Olive had found speedily enough that which would be required of her. Long before Cedric had come into her life she had endeavoured to make what use she could of those gentler feelings within her, which nothing but the very wildness of the sea had given her. And with her return to Claniston came back some of the sea's influence. Yet it was the very irony of things that Cedric himself should have come to counterbalance this. There came over her something of a relaxation, and at an unrealized expense she became more of her father's daughter. Cedric had made her former conscious efforts necessary once again—it was her whim to act the woman she thought he would most like her to be—but after a little time she let herself glide whither the fates willed; and not even her love for him, nor his presence by the sea, could altogether prevent the appearance of just that suggestion of commonness which Cedric found so irritating, so surfeiting. His æsthetic sense was hurt. Day by day he noticed something in her which before he had thought to be absent. She was denying herself nothing in the matter of physical luxuries. He witnessed in her what he thought was a growing fondness for brandy, but said nothing. Somehow, any remonstrance on such a subject seemed too mean, too petty for him. That it had

been in a great measure her very voluptuousness which had appealed to him he had never sought to disguise from himself, but it was galling now to find that she did not understand any but the lower human impulses. He had called himself a fool to expect from her that which a Ruth Sheridan could give him, and yet that touch of the girl in her, which even now kept coming to the surface at odd moments, making her still the enigma she had always been to him, had done much to counteract the cooling of his passion, such as it was. Finally, he had been able to leave her without regret, without so much as a pang, rather with a feeling of relief.

It was then that Mr. Drew, who had been waiting for this event, thought fit to assert himself, and, being the possessor of more than an ordinary amount of cunning, succeeded in making his presence and help almost a necessity.

The cheque and the curt letter which had come to Olive had left her in a state which it would be difficult accurately to describe. Moreover, had Mr. John Drew not been desirous of stepping into the shoes which Cedric had so lately cast off, it is doubtful what exactly might have happened ; as it was, Mr. Drew set about his task with a perseverance worthy of a better cause. He posed first as the friend in need. By a series of specious remarks which to any save Olive might have revealed his cunning, he began to make her imagine that she had never been more than ordinarily fond of this man, who, however good she might have thought him, had certainly left her in the most callous manner. Olive sobbed, stormed, raved. Mr. Drew showed himself a past-master in the difficult art of successful coaxing. He recognised in her the wild animal balked of its food

—that was his own simile—and acted accordingly. Olive began to pour out her woes. Mr. Drew helped himself to the brandy he found in the cottage, and prescribed it as medicine to Olive. Finally, he learned of the cheque which had come, and without much difficulty persuaded her to cash it. It was larger than might have been expected, representing as it did a small fortune, and Mr. Drew began to congratulate himself. Truth to say, one or two of his latest transactions had not met with that success which he considered they deserved.

A month had sufficed him to obtain a certain hold over her, and in his hands she became weak. The united influence of her new friend and the brandy wrought changes in her which must have saddened all save Drew himself.

Yet something happened for which Olive herself had been totally unprepared. A month after Cedric had gone, she found she was to become a mother, and the knowledge nearly succeeded in driving all Drew's insidious remarks out of her head. For days she would not see him. She sat alone in the little room where Cedric had worked, and tried to think. She did not realize that Drew was doing everything for her, that he was bringing her the necessities of life. But he was playing his cards with care, and she found that she could not do without him. She forgot Cedric, but only until his child was born. Then not even Drew, nor the old woman whom he had brought over from Dover, could stop her almost maddened utterances. She shouted her love for Cedric ; he must come to her, he must see his child. She became ill ; it was a marvel that the child survived, but Drew and the old hag managed in the end to calm her. The former, scenting

blackmail, posted the single sentence which Olive scribbled.

Two awful months followed. Olive's love for the child changed to something like hate. No one saw her save Drew and the old wretch, who seemed satisfied so long as she received her pay and a generous supply of brandy. Another ruffian then joined Drew, and these two made the cottage a house of cruel revelry. They drank most of the day, the while were being hatched such a series of diabolical designs as must have frightened Olive had not the drink already begun its work. Gradually she allowed herself to become its slave; the child was almost neglected, and nothing but drink satisfied her—drink and the society of those who had taken Cedric's place. The two men let themselves go; Olive had money in plenty, and they lived on her. Drew ceased to show himself in the village, or hold those pleasant meetings in his bungalow. Letters came from London for Olive, but they remained unopened. The days passed, but she became more and more dead to all feelings save the most degraded. Cedric, the stage, everything was forgotten but the drink.

The sun shining down on the little cottage, the gentle sea washing idly on the rocks not four hundred yards away, the birds singing in the trees round about, all would have seemed a hideous mockery had the scenes which were taking place within the cottage become known.

A little child had once looked in through a window, but he had fled with a cry. Even he could understand something which his eyes had seen.

During his last year at Rugby Cedric had imagined that all those qualities which he supposed went to

make the perfect woman were to be found in a certain young lady whose Christian name happened to be Mary. Mary—he had never found out further particulars—lived on the outskirts of the town, and Cedric had been in the habit of paying surreptitious visits to the near neighbourhood of her father's house. With commendable secrecy he would approach the sacred domicile by a variety of circuitous paths, and then at a distance of some fifty yards perform what he had come to describe as a 'hover.' This consisted in certain perambulations, undertaken with no particular end in view save perhaps in the hope of catching a glimpse of Mary, but pleasurable inasmuch as they were carried out in her near vicinity. In after life he had on more than one occasion found himself 'hovering.' At Cambridge, at Sieveley, even in Chelsea, he had found himself in a position where the realization of his unexpressed hopes would have proved no small shock.

Now as he walked along the cliffs in the direction of Claniston he had a mind to hover. There was a vague hope, perhaps, in his breast that he might see things without being seen, a desire, hardly understood at the moment, to be in, but not of, what scenes might be taking place in Olive's cottage.

As he turned away from the path, and began to descend into the valley where he and Olive had so often sat side by side listening in a lazy contentment to the faint sounds from the long grass about them, and from the bay down below them, he mused on this child of his. There was something owing to it, something which Olive could never give.

'I hate, I hate it,' he was whispering, but other thoughts were crowding into his brain. He had often worked out his own scheme for the bringing up of any

boy of his. A good school, his own college at Cambridge, a social circle which should beget none but the healthiest principles—these represented his ideal education. His boy, he had told himself, should never become intimate with the 'Openhearts' of the world. His boy should shine rather as athlete than as philosopher; the former was so much the happier of the two. He had, with his love of probing into details, even gone so far as to choose the clubs and societies to which his boy should attach himself. The father was to profit by his own misfortunes in the past, and see that the son walked only along the fairest paths. And now this child had been born, and all his dreams for its progress through the world had been shattered. The child had come unasked, branded with a slur on its name which would prove a real barrier with most, save, he thought bitterly, those now despised 'Openhearts' themselves. They might welcome a bastard, but who else?

He hurried down the incline, and then stopped to listen. A sound of laughter had caught his ears. It came from the cottage he knew so well. He looked at his watch. The revolving beacon showed him the time. Half-past ten, and Ruth was lying in bed with a headache. Why not go back at once before he heard more, before he found out the truth for himself? An unreasoning anger was enveloping him, the anger of a man who has suffered a cruel disappointment. He had never before realized what the birth of this child could mean to him. A child with no father, a child left with Olive, who was common, who lacked even the ordinary understanding of a gentlewoman! It was unfair, cruel. He stood still with his eyes on the ground, his two hands on a stick in front of him.

Another laugh came through the darkness, and it was followed by the faintest of wails. Was it bird or human being? He moved on a few steps. There was a light in one of the windows. That throb which sometimes explains to us thoughts we would have hidden away passed through him. Again he wanted to go back to his wife, and again something detained him. Like some thief of the night he stole up to the garden gate. The weak, pitiful cry of a baby smote his ears. Before he had realized what he had done his hand had raised the knocker, and let it fall sharp on the front door. Then, while he waited, the desire to hide his face came upon him with a terror lest he should not find her alone with their child. There was a wild impulse to rush away into the darkness, but he stood still, and drummed his fingers on the handle of his stick.

A voice he failed to recognise shouted 'Jack,' and the door opened.

'My God, you!'

The thought that this meeting was in the nature of some absurd melodrama of the provincial stage passed at swallow pace through his brain. Then he noted her wild appearance, the sunken eyes, unkempt hair, disordered dress. He stepped back involuntarily. This creature the mother of his child!

'I can come in, I suppose?' he asked almost in a whisper. 'Anyone else here?'

She shook her head.

'I am coming in.' He spoke in louder tones.

Olive had swayed, but she clutched at a chair to steady herself, and gazed stupidly at him.

'What d'you want?' she asked at last.

'The child—the boy. Upstairs?' He shut the door behind him. He felt himself to be in that semi-

drunken state which banishes all clarity of thought, all certainty of opinion. As they stared at one another it seemed to him ghastly that he had once called her the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. What on earth did beauty mean if this creature and the girl of the Ostend packet were one and the same?

'The boy? Oh—safe enough.' She uttered a miserable little laugh. She had been drinking heavily, but the sudden appearance of Cedric had partially sobered her. Cedric heard another cry. It had come suddenly upon him that the child must be taken away at all costs. There could be no pity for the mother, only for the child. His own foolishness in the past had not become criminal, only infinitely more inexplicable. He took off his hat, and put his stick on a chair. He was conscious of an utter inability to make a further move. Olive swung round, and staggered into the little room where he had so often sat with his manuscript—still unfinished—in front of him, and Cedric followed her. His eyes took in the squalor of everything. A lamp with no shade cast a bright light over the room, in bitter emphasis, as it were, of the grossness of things. Glasses, some half full, none of them with any pretensions to cleanness, strewed the table with its stained cloth, and the remains of some joint stood on a dish which, as Cedric involuntarily noticed, was chipped in three places.

'Well, you've got plenty to say.' Olive's hands were grasping a bottle.

'Good God, leave it for a minute,' shouted Cedric, suddenly finding his voice. 'Put it down; you've had enough. Don't drink—put it down, I say. For God's sake, stop!' He had for the moment become almost frightened of her. She had changed past all recog-

dition, and he felt that he knew nothing of her now. They were strangers, and yet that child howling dismally upstairs was their boy. 'Put that down, Olive,' he repeated, and tried to gain possession of the bottle.

She snatched it away. 'Leave me alone. I know what I want.' There was a snarl in her tones, the snarl of an animal at bay. 'I know what I want,' she repeated in a louder voice, but she put the bottle down, and sank into a chair, breathing heavily.

A pitiful change had been worked by Drew and his ally. She seemed an old woman now with the fire in her dark eyes quenched, her fine skin blotched to many colours, her hands in a painful tremble. This creature—Cedric could think of her as nothing else—was but a poor travesty of womanhood, motherhood.

'I want to see the child,' said Cedric deliberately.

'Our child.' There was no expression in her voice.

'Yes, our child.' His anger had risen again on a sudden. 'Bring it here.'

Her head lolled dismally from side to side. 'No fear,' she said.

'Fetch it down, do you hear !' said Cedric fiercely. There was still no settled plan, yet the child must be seen.

'Where's your wife ?' asked the woman.

Cedric started.

'I want to see the boy,' he said doggedly.

'You've got your wife instead. Nice for her to see your child, eh ? Damn you, you've got your wife, and I've got the child, curse it !'

Cedric made a move to leave the room, but she rushed at him with unexpected vigour. 'Leave the

child where it is,' she shouted. 'Neither you nor your damned wife shall see him.' She broke off for a minute to gaze at him in a stupid, drunken way. 'Who's your wife? Who the devil is your — wife?'

'Stop that,' cried Cedric, maddened.

'I'll kill it before you see it.' Into her dull brain had come the thought that Cedric was her enemy. Without warning she began to call up words which Cedric hardly understood, but which he recognised were insulting, of the vilest possible nature. She had placed herself between him and the door, and with her head thrown back, her bosom half bared, she mocked at him, mocked at his wife, cursed him and all that was his. It was as though a very devil were playing prompter; the words rushed out in a mad torrent—words which stirred him to frenzy. The fumes in the room, the chaos in his head, the sight of this loathsome object before him, all seemed suddenly to have bereft him of his senses. Without understanding what he was intending, with no sure knowledge what work his hands were at, he sprang at her in a fury. . . .

And as they struggled, Cedric had only the feeling of the conqueror. His fingers had clutched her throat, and it was as though all the muscles in his body had gone to his finger-tips. Her screams stopped suddenly, and her face grew black, but Cedric saw nothing, and his hands still clutched her neck. They swayed to and fro, but he had exerted all his force, the force of a madman, and he fell over her. . . .

He had a vision of teeth chattering, a shuddering, quivering thing beneath him, and still his fingers were buried in her neck. He could not move them. . . .

Her eyes rolled horribly, there was a froth at her

blue lips, and then Cedric had wrung his hands away, and was pressing his own forehead. . . .

How damnably funny ! That pattern on the carpet, he noted, was a replica of one he had seen in a London house which he connected vaguely with Aunt Janet. How damnably funny !

There was another cry from upstairs. . . .

‘ Why don’t I wake ? Why don’t I wake ?’

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SUFFERER OF SLINGS

OLIVE RANGER was dead.

'Why don't I wake?' It was his own heart which seemed to be panting out the words. 'Why don't I wake?' Where were the friendly sheets he wanted to feel about his neck, the blankets to be tossed away from him? This thing on the floor did not move. In all former dreams, Cedric thought in his stupor, it would invariably have advanced upon him until its metamorphosis into valet or housemaid.

He saw the bottle of brandy on the table, and poured himself out a drink. Mechanically he had held one or two of the glasses to the lamp, to note their respective states of brightness. Then he sat down in an arm-chair, and looked at the body which lay as it had fallen, huddled into queer shapes. For some minutes he was attempting to make himself believe what had happened, his own connection with the whole ghastly affair. So far, no thought of the consequences had entered his brain. It was the actual killing of a creature which appeared so inexplicable. 'I have killed a woman,' he was musing, 'and must be classed with murderers. Yet I feel no murderer, only a little dazed, and waiting to wake up. I must wake up. Have I killed her? She insulted Ruth, and I put my fingers to her neck. I don't remember rushing at her. Did

she insult Ruth? Yes, for my hands held her throat until she was dead. And I don't know whether I meant to kill her or no.'

There was another cry from upstairs.

Cedric suddenly began to shiver. This was no time for musing on the morality of the thing. He was a criminal, a man who might be hanged. Instinct, or something akin to it, warned him to be gone. With no feeling of disgust, he dragged the body under the table, though for what precise reason he could not have said, put out the lamp, and listened in the passage for a possible cry from the child. All plans for this boy of his had vanished in an instant, yet he felt that he wanted to hear its cries. He waited a minute or two, and then, having picked up his hat and stick, stole out into the garden. He managed to shut the front-door without noise, but the little gate at the bottom of the garden creaked, and Cedric started with a newborn fear, as though, indeed, the gate had creaked of its own accord.

Someone might come, he was whispering, and he wanted time to think.

The air seemed icy cold. He stumbled up the incline, not stopping until he had reached the summit, where he stood motionless to gaze out over the black seas. The storm had passed away over to the west now, and everything seemed still save the sea itself. With a little cry that was half-sigh, half-sob, he hurried along the path which skirted the two lighthouses. Turning off from the narrow walk, a thread of grey in the blackness of the hills, he descended a gentle slope, on which little shrubs grew in clumps, and stood at the edge of the cliff. Looking to the right, in the direction of Dover, he saw the figure of a man loom

forth, and to Cedric a man at that moment represented the whole of a pitiless, vengeance-seeking mankind. He stooped down beside a shrub until his feet were almost over the cliff's edge.

The figure passed by whistling softly, and Cedric on a sudden was seized with the idea that the man must be going to the cottage.

'Time, time,' he muttered; 'I've no time for anything.' But he lay still, and looked over the sea, and his face was hard and drawn with the look of a man who cannot fathom a mystery.

Memories of his mother came to mind as he lay there—of his dear little mother, whose antagonism to all those past theories of his, which he had liked to think were so noble, so full of a pathos that meant nothing save to the few, had not moved him, save, perhaps, at the awful moment of her own death. What would she have said to this grim incident in her son's career? Poor little mother, she had been spared any knowledge of his life with Olive Ranger. There were hard, dry sobs at the back of his throat.

'I must think it out—think it out,' he murmured; and he drew up his knees till they touched his chin. What was it, he asked himself, that had brought about this hideous scene in the cottage? Could it have been avoided? Was he to have stood there in that frowzy room to hear his wife vilified, likened to the miserable being from whom in a mad moment his fingers had snatched all life? His wife! How could he tell her that her husband was a murderer? He had not been able to tell her of the birth of his son; how, then, could he announce this new tragedy?

He tried to picture the future. What could there be in store for him, for Ruth, his friends, the howling

baby in the cottage ? A horrible publicity for everyone in any way connected with him, a possible fate for himself which was too terrible to contemplate—that seemed about all. In an agony, he thought of the Dowager at Chipton, of Mrs. Sheridan ; then of Winnington Orley, the Mannings, Lacey, Sothernmere. His mind travelled back to that scene between himself and Sothernmere in Olive's flat. How fateful it had been, and how useless ! Olive was dead now.

'There must be some meaning in it all,' he said aloud ; and the low hiss of the waves as they broke upon the rocks hundreds of feet below him seemed to be saying that this murder was only in the nature of things. His life, he reflected as so often before, had been one long failure to realize himself, to realize the reason for his existence—had been, indeed, a battle with Fate, from which Fate, of course, had emerged the conqueror. His lot had been that of the sufferer of slings. God's hand and men's had been against him. He was of the minorities which had perforce to be trampled upon. Simpletons like Tom Manning, scholars like Winnington Orley had bade him not probe problems which seemed so hard of solution, yet they had not understood. His was a life which they did not imagine existed. It was only the very few who understood, and as often as not those few did not care. Once again he would fain have believed that nothing mattered ; yet now he had placed himself in a position where man—surely a petty creature, yet powerful for all that—stepped in, and said in his unutterable conceit : 'This must not be.' And so this murder must be the end of all things for himself, and if others were to be included in the consequences of his own failure, it could not be helped. He recalled a saying of Mrs.

Puddock's : ' This thinkin' an' all that leads to suicide, and n'thin' else.' Mrs. Puddock, then, was to turn out a prophet, and Cedric thought grimly how, when news came to her of his last act, she would say : ' I said as much.'

And it had all come about through that storm—a gust of wind, a pelting of water from the skies, a change in the working of the elements ! There had been, as it were, a conspiracy, and Fate had sent its myrmidons to put a veto on his proposed flight out of England. It was perfectly clear. If it was not Nemesis, then it was something closely akin.

His thoughts ran to his wife. Poor little Ruth must not be saddled with a murderer for husband. She would forgive him, but what of that ? How could he go to her as he was now—with a stain on his hands ? No, the end had come, and it was represented by this white cliff at a corner of England. A run, a bewilderment, a pain of the moment perhaps, and then there was nothing to follow. Here was the remedy for his mistakes—the mistakes of the minority—a run, a leap, and then nothing. The thing was simplicity itself. He looked almost hungrily down into the depths, and it was characteristic of him that as he allowed his mind to dwell on these matters, he became calmer, better enabled to see things in a proper light. It occurred to him that his suicide must be made to have the semblance of an accident. So much was due to Ruth, to his friends. ' Arrange for an accident in such a case,' someone had said once, jestingly alluding to the question of suicide ; ' it is only fair to your friends. Saddle yourself with a verdict of insanity, and your friends suffer.' No, he would arrange for the accident. His friends should not suffer. He had to think, too,

of Ruth, and of that son of his crying in its cot—the son of a murdered mother.

‘God ! I’d forgotten the child,’ he said, and immediately he was the prey of a thousand miserable thoughts. What a horror it was—this losing of both parents in a single night. Then he asked himself why Ruth should not have the child. His son, for whom he had hoped so much, should at least have a mother, but he remembered that Ruth knew nothing of the child, would not believe the boy was his, did he not tell her so himself.

‘And I daren’t see her, I daren’t, I daren’t,’ he cried in a mad paroxysm. ‘I can’t see her. Oh, my own sweet Ruth, why couldn’t I have told you of this boy ? You would have understood.’

A gentle wind rose up and fanned his face, but Cedric did not feel it. There was sweat at his forehead, and the shivering had begun again. In some dim way he realized that he was playing the coward all uselessly. A time for strength had come, and willy-nilly worries of the kind now surging through a brain that would only work dully must be banished.

‘Tom’s right in his philosophy,’ he told himself. ‘I’ve probed things about all my wretched God-forsaken life, and now I’m brought to this. God ! how absurdly melodramatic the whole thing is, and how pitiful ! I want strength for a minute—just a few seconds of strength. . . .’


His breath was coming in short, thick gasps as he rose from his cramped position and prepared for the last act.

‘I can’t bear more,’ he muttered with teeth clenched together. ‘I won’t think of anything. I won’t think, I won’t think.’ Yet, try as he would, thoughts passed jumble-fashion through his mind. Here might be

some excitement for Hetherington, the journalist with his ubiquitous pipe—this must, thought Cedric, provide him with copy after his own heart. And it was Hetherington who had been the first to point out Sothernmere to him at the Ostend hotel. Somehow, it seemed now that the journalist was partly to blame for all that had followed, and if Hetherington, why not Sheridan himself with his narrow views on men and things? Sheridan, of course, had helped to murder Olive Ranger, Sheridan and Barnett and the other minions of the Church; it was they who had driven him from London to an Archester lodging-house, to the woman who was now lying dead, a horrible object hidden beneath a table. It was men like them who made religion impossible for such as himself, and in a moment all his old ideas, the ideas of Lemonier and D'Arcy Vaughan, had come back to him. He recalled now the times when he had owned to himself in the secrecy of his bedroom his own supposed weakness of mind in the matter of faith, an inability to thrust away all belief in a God. He had liked to think that some vestiges of an early begotten superstition must for ever be dogging him, to cast doubts on his scheme of philosophy.

And now it seemed to him, all frightened of God and men, that a return to those old superstitions would be necessary. In these last few minutes of his life there would have to be a harking back to half-forgotten beliefs, and he tried to formulate some prayer, but no prayer would come to his lips.

With a cry of the hunted animal, a cry which was almost a snarl, he ran forward, a feeling of dizziness in his head, large drops of perspiration rolling down his cheeks.



'Now . . . now,' he gasped. 'Let me forget everything. . . .'

He was scrambling over the brambles, tearing the flesh on his legs, cutting his trousers to shreds, but he felt nothing. Another moment and all would be over. . . .

From away in the west a sound of bells stole over the hills, musical bells with a quaint chime. Involuntarily he stopped, and rested on his knees. Why on earth had those bells reached his ears at this moment of all others? There seemed to be some meaning in this midnight music. He had braced himself, he thought, for the final effort, but that chime had come to thrust away all physical courage. He was crying like a child of tender years, crying as only a coward could cry. Once he straightened himself up. He had always admired the men of old times who thought so little of human life. Why at a critical moment could he not be as they?

'Why not? Why not?' he moaned.

Again he started for the edge, but he paused after a few steps and wiped his forehead. He wondered in dazed fashion how men could bring themselves to blot out their lives. It was an act which seemed then to be above human powers. Yet many had done it, men whom he had sometimes called cowards.

Coward, coward, what did the word mean? Was it the man who was frightened of death, or the man who could not face his fellows? All on a sudden new questions loomed large in his disordered mind. Was this suicide necessary after all? Would it not perhaps be only a further sign of his wretched unmanliness?

Olive Ranger had been murdered, but who could prove himself to be the murderer? Was it fair to Ruth to resign without a struggle? Could it not be that the providence which had arranged the strange medley of his life in the past held something unexpected for the future? In a moment Cedric was able to realize that all his preparations for death had been nothing but a gruesome sham, a paltry scene for an audience of his own ignoble self. He had never intended to commit suicide.

'I will face things,' he thought now. 'Others have done it before me. We will leave England to-morrow. I have been looking on the darkest side of things. There may be a way of escape—there must be a way. I am no murderer. Olive and I were struggling, she in a drunken state, I mad for the moment; she died by an accident. How absurd to suppose that I killed her! It was an accident. Yet others may call it a murder, and Ruth with a murderer for husband! She will forgive me—ah. . . .' He had recalled her words spoken on that wonderful honeymoon of theirs: '*I would be ready to kill anyone who came between us, anyone who took what we've got from us.*' Well, Olive Ranger had come between them, and she was dead. And if he were hailed her murderer he must make his stand. The end had not yet come after all. There was to be a future even though at the moment he could read nothing into it. Yes, this scene on the cliff, this morbid communing with himself had been nothing but a pitiful farce.

He almost laughed as he started to walk down into the valley which separated the cliff, on which stood the lighthouses, like quaint sentinels, from the table-like hill on the Claniston side of Dover Castle.

It was once again a question of Ruth's happiness, and it seemed to him that this was all he must think of. In his excitement, full of new hopes which he was surprised had only then come to him, forgetful almost of the tragedy from which he was hastening, he ran down into the valley. Here the path skirted inland for some few hundred yards, but Cedric in his eagerness made a short cut across the shrub-covered stretch nearer the edge. As he hurried on, now clambering over the little mounds which he encountered at every other step, now slipping into holes hidden beneath horizontal meshes of foliage, his thoughts were only of what he should say to Ruth. Perhaps it would be well to tell her all. That was, it seemed to him, what his little mother would have most liked, and somehow his mother seemed to be very near him just then. He could recall those quiet words of hers on the subject of his wasted opportunities. She had wanted her Cedie to be such a fine man, and he had long known that she had died nursing a bitter disappointment. Well, he would try to make amends. And Ruth should be told everything. They would face the world together.

A little prayer with no words came as a comfort, a help.

'I will tell her everything. She is my wife. It is to her I must look for help.'

On past the brambles he made his way, and then something whizzing past his ear caused him to take a sharp step to the left. He uttered a loud cry as he felt his foot slipping—he had come nearer to the edge than he had supposed—and he lost his balance. There was a treacherous break in the cliff's contour, a break which he had forgotten. His cry re-echoed from many

points. His hand clutched at a shrub, but it broke away, and he slipped down a smooth perpendicular stretch of chalk. There was a surging in his head as in his frenzy he tried to clasp a jutting point, but his hand caught nothing. A last agonized cry was choked at its birth. . . .

There was a falling of stones as his body dashed headlong down the white rugged cliff.

The tide was high now, and the waves, no longer the ripples they had seemed from the cliff, dashed in and amongst the weed-laden rocks. Here and there huge boulders were piled one upon the other, all with their incrustation of green. The shingle on the beach had been gathered by the storm into heaps and banks, and the fall of rock had shed a dust over the slime at the cliff's foot. Away out at sea heavy breakers splashed over a group of rocks which had not yet become immersed, endowing them with queer animal-like shapes. A little later the wind rose, the clouds grew denser, the darkness more intense, and the waves greedily entwining the boulders on the beach bore away something into their black depths, and then, as though disappointed in their prey, cast it on to the surface of the waters.

THE END



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